C. H. Hunt '94

Tales from The Raven

A FOREVER KNIGHT fanzine

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Contents

ONE DAY IN THE SUN
A **Forever Knight** novella by Christine Hantzopulos Hunt
Part One: Mortal Love.....1
Part Two: The Birthday Party.....6

Poetry by Cicatrice du Veritas.....60

Artwork by Jeffrey J. Hunt.....60

Poetry by Cicatrice du Veritas.....61

The Conversation by Valerie C. Nolan.....62

The Phone Call by Valerie C. Nolan.....64

O Valiant Knight by Christine Hantzopulos Hunt.....67

The Celebration by Wanda Lee vonSeeberg.....68

Poetry by Elizabeth Ortiz.....76

The Dress by Valerie C. Nolan.....77

Poetry by Cicatrice du Veritas.....80

Helpless by Wanda Lee vonSeeberg.....81

Artwork by Cagri Sari.....85

The Issue (A Sequel to ONE DAY IN THE SUN)
by Christine Hantzopulos Hunt.....86

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One Day in The Sun

A two-part novella

by

C. H. Hunt

Mortal Love

by Christine Hantzopulos Hunt

Nick watched as Natalie walked slowly away. She hesitated, turning to look at him, and a reassuring smile crossed his lips. He could see her trying to smile back through her pain of the last few days, through the confusion she was feeling now, but her efforts were in vain. She nodded lightly, turned, and was gone. Nick was left alone with his own confusion--and guilt.

Natalie had almost died. And he knew that it had been his own fault. Her feelings for him, and his lack of response, had driven her to another man. And Natalie's anger at Nick had blinded her to a psychotic killer's true nature, placing her life in grave danger.

I almost lost her, Nick thought to himself. And the feelings that this near loss had engendered in him filled him with his own private turmoil, awakening a sorrow that had plagued him time and again since he'd begun this cursed existence.

Natalie had become, in the last two years, the closest mortal friend he had ever known. Her constant concern, and efforts to help him reach his seemingly unattainable goal, were invaluable to him. But Nick knew it was much more than that. **He loved her.** The mutual caring and respect that had developed between them had flourished into something far deeper. And each moment he'd spent with her, in the midst of a case, in a weak moment of retreat towards vampirism, or in the quiet lull of an early morning spent together, he'd come to realize just how important she'd become to him.

Yet he'd fought it. Hidden it from her, and even from himself, hoping that he was misreading the signals she'd been sending. But he could avoid the inevitable no more. And if he were about to embark on that same vicious cycle that could only end once more in the pain of loss, then so be it.

Nick glanced at his watch as he waited outside Natalie's apartment, waiting for her to come to the door. Yet as she asked who was there, he had trouble finding the voice to answer, "It's me. Nick."

Her face betrayed surprise as she admitted him, self-consciously pulling closed the short robe that covered a long T-shirt. "I wasn't expecting you," she stammered, nervously wiping her cheek. Her eyes were red, and Nick knew at once that she'd been crying.

He stepped towards her, putting his hands on her shoulders. "Are you all right?"

"Yeah, I'm fine," she said in a voice that was far from convincing. "Isn't it a little late for you?"

"I had to see you, Nat," he replied. "I'm sorry for coming so late--and unannounced--but we really need to talk."

She nodded her agreement and he led her to the couch, sitting to face her. He reached his hand to her cheek, reveling in the warmth of her skin. "You've been crying," he said matter-of-factly, but with a concern that she couldn't help but notice.

"It's just been a rough few days," she replied, looking into his eyes. "I...I must look terrible."

"I think you look beautiful," he said softly. He could feel her skin warming his as she covered his hand with her own. "Natalie, I've been unfair to you. It's because of me that you almost..." His voice trailed off.

"It's not your fault, Nick," she assured him. "It's mine, for wanting too much from you. We're friends, and I value that more than anything. "

"So do I," he began.

"I feel really foolish now for even hoping you might feel something more." She pulled away from him, suddenly uncomfortable with the closeness. With her back turned, she said, "I'm sorry. And I'm embarrassed. Please, don't let this interfere with our friendship."

Nick came up behind her. "Natalie, you shouldn't be embarrassed."

"But I am, " she came back, turning to face him. "Nick, I was a fool to even think you might feel the same way I do! I don't even know where my head was."

"In the right place," he told her, resting his hands on her shoulders. "Natalie, I **do** feel the same way. I have been in love with you for a very long time."

Her eyes opened wide in amazement. "You...have?"

He smiled at her and nodded. "Yes. I suppose I just didn't want to admit it."

"I guess men just don't change even if they do live for eight hundred years," she teased as she slipped her arms around his neck.

"I guess not," he replied softly. And for a few moments, he was that man that he had been eight hundred years ago, as he bent his head towards hers, allowing his cold flesh to melt in the warmth of her kiss. Her humanity was beckoning him, transforming him, her hungry kiss awakening a kind of passion that had been lost to him for centuries, replaced by a different kind of hunger. He wanted to lose himself in her warmth, her beauty, her desire. He

was relishing the taste of her mouth, the light touch of her fingers on his bare neck, running through his hair, the soft scent of her skin, her hair...her blood...

"No..." he moaned pulling away from her. He couldn't fight it. And he couldn't hurt her. "Natalie..." he groaned in a voice lower than his own. "Don't you see why I can't love you...no matter how much I want to?"

He was backing away, his face filled with pain, his eyes gleaming yellow, conscious of the fact that his fangs had protruded to meet his lower lip. Natalie reached for him, fighting his instinct to pull away, taking his hands and holding them tightly.

"I'm not afraid of you, Nick," she said insistently. "I know what you are, and I love you. I know you won't hurt me."

"How can you love this beast?" he asked sadly.

"You're no beast, Nick Knight," she told him, looking into his eyes, unafraid. She stepped closer, placing his arms around her waist, and pulling him close. "And I know you won't hurt me."

Nick looked at her sorrowfully, incredulously, as he felt his eyes slowly lose their glow.

"It's okay. It's okay. You can fight it," she urged him.

The bestial glare had been replaced by his clear blue eyes, but bloody tears had begun to stream his face. His monstrous strength gone, Nick felt himself weaken in her arms, and held her tightly. She had been so brave, so loving; he was unashamed now to shed the first tears he'd allowed himself in centuries.

Dawn had come, and weariness attacked his body. Nick lay peacefully on Natalie's bed, thankful for the thick curtains and tightly-closing vertical blinds. He looked at her with a smirk as she handed him a thick clear liquid.

"Not another protein drink," he joked weakly.

"I don't feel like dealing with your reaction to coffee," she replied with a smile. She propped the pillow below his head, and he brought himself up to sip the tasteless beverage. The unlikely drink quickly sated his thirst, and he could feel some strength returning.

"That stuff's not so bad when you're really thirsty," he teased. "Maybe a little red food coloring and you could market it..."

She smiled as she sat down to face him. "How do you feel?"

"Better." His smile faded as he took her hand. "Do you see now why I never told you how I felt about you, Nat? What could come of it?"

"I don't know," she told him. "But I'm willing to wait and see."

He squeezed her hand, the old sorrow overwhelming him. "You don't have an eternity to wait for me, Nat."

"It won't take an eternity!" she insisted. "You've made so much progress--"

"But not enough," he responded in frustration. "Natalie, don't you see that there's a part of me that wants to hold you, and make love to you--but the other part of me, the beast that I can't escape, would destroy you! I won't take a chance of hurting you."

"I don't believe you could hurt me, Nick," she told him with conviction.

Nick sighed deeply, reaching up to caress her curly, flowing hair. "I might not be able to help myself. Natalie, I know you want to believe in me. But I can sense that you're afraid too."

She looked down, knowing he was reading her eyes. "Of course I'm a little afraid, Nick. I've never been in love with a vampire before. What do you expect?"

He reached out to her, wrapping his arms around her, letting her rest her head against his chest. "I've tried to love before, Natalie. And every time has ended in tragedy. For me, passion turns into a hunger I can't control. Any mortal woman that I've tried to make love to..."

"You're different now," she whispered, looking up at him. "And changing every day..."

"I don't want to hurt you. And I don't want to--" he couldn't finish.

"Bring me over?" she finished for him.

He nodded. "You've seen what can happen. Your brother...I could never condemn you to this existence."

"Then let me keep trying to bring you over to mine," she told him. "And maybe being close to me can teach you some...control."

"Would you be satisfied with this kind of relationship?"

She breathed deeply. "Would you?"

He smiled. "Natalie, I haven't had a relationship with a mortal woman in eight hundred years."

"Well, I've been out of circulation a couple of years myself--"

His fingers moved to her cheek, caressing her warmth. "Just the possibility of someday being able to love you like that...maybe you've given me a real goal to work for."

Natalie smiled comfortably for the first time. "Hey, it's mid-morning already. Maybe you'd better rest, and we can talk more tonight."

He nodded, yawning. "I am tired. I think I'd better sleep until nightfall."

"I feel bad that you didn't get back to your place--"

"Why, do you mind my staying here?" he asked with a twinkle in his eye.

"No, but--I though vampires don't feel safe until they're locked away in their havens."

"You've been reading too many horror stories." He reached to kiss her on the lips, pulling safely away before his passion could build. "I feel safe with you." He kissed her again, a moment longer this time, delighted that he could do so. Then he looked at her with a strange smile.

"There is something you could do to make me feel safer, though," he added.

"What?"

"Lie here with me. Please."

She grinned. "I guess I am a little sleepy myself." She lay down beside him, snuggling against him, warming him.

"Natalie, I have to admit something," he whispered in her ear as he held her to him. "It's not just to feel safe. I wanted to feel you next to me."

"I know," she replied softly, cuddling closer.

And Nick held her, in wonder, her life force enveloping him. He slept deeply that day, dreaming sweet dreams of Natalie and the humanity he knew would someday be theirs to share.

The Birthday Party

by Christine Hantzopulos Hunt

It had been a slow but tedious night, and Natalie was glad to throw her lab coat over a hook, shake loose her hair and collapse wearily into her chair. The desk clock read four twenty seven a.m. Just a half hour before the end of this shift--and ninety minutes until sunrise. She glanced at the picture of her, Schanke and Nick, wondering if she'd see her elusive vampire before the night was over. She sighed, opening her desk drawer to find the novel she'd buried herself in as of late--**Interview with the Vampire**, by Anne Rice. She was deep into her reading when the door flew open.

She smiled to see Nick, his eyes bright with enthusiasm, his blonde hair framing a face that had almost begun to show the slight flush of life. She was so proud of the progress he had made in the last few months, keeping away from even the cow's blood that had held back his slow advance towards regaining his humanity. Knowing that she had played such an important part in his success had made it all the more sweet. Her pleasure at seeing him showed in her eyes.

"You're looking pretty good," she observed as he came to her side.

The balding, middle-aged man who had accompanied him spoke up. "It's the good food I've been feeding him lately. No more of those health-nut milk shakes. Tonight we had nice thick, greasy hamburgers." Schanke shook his head. "Although I've gotta say, I've never seen anyone eat meat as raw as you do, partner."

Nick laughed good-heartedly as Natalie shot him an amused look. "Burned meat is bad for you, Schanke. Sometimes you have to taste a little fresh blood."

Schanke shrugged as he leaned against Natalie's desk. "Yeah, Myra always says that, too." Suddenly, his curious eye caught the book Natalie had been reading. "**Interview with the Vampire?** What's all this spooky stuff you've been into? First the two of you go to see the midnight showing of **Bram Stoker's Dracula**--twice, yet--then you're into Anne

Rice. I tell you, Natalie, this isn't the kind of stuff I'd like to read working with a bunch of dead bodies all night long."

"To each his own, Schanke," Natalie replied, winking at Nick. "As for me, I love vampires. Don't you, Nick?"

He thought a moment. "Not all, but some of them."

Schanke shook his head. "I dunno. You two get stranger all the time. I think I'll just head on home and let Myra make me breakfast."

"You just ate!" Nick called after him, then turned to Natalie as the door closed behind his partner. "So, you love vampires, do you? Anyone else I should know about?"

"No. Just one," she said, as he took her into his arms, kissing her.

It was much easier for him now. Holding her, kissing her like this, had afforded him the human warmth and pleasure he'd thought he'd forgotten. Even the beast in him seemed to lie dormant as he found that he could be close to her without the vampire intruding upon them. He had not, of course, been able to carry their intimacy much further than a passionate kiss. But each step towards a mortal life together gave them both hope, and the ability to go on despite the caution that they must still maintain.

Nick released her. "So, studying up on vampires? Don't you know that stuff's all fiction?"

"I don't know," she told him, picking up the book to thumb through it. "A lot of this sounds like you. And Lestat seems so much like LaCroix, from what you've told me."

"I don't know. I've never read it."

"Well you should." She pointed out a passage to him. "Louis thought he killed Lestat; he saw him burn. But then Lestat came back." She looked up at him. "Nick, you saw LaCroix burn. But did you scatter his ashes?"

He looked at her in bemusement. "No, why?"

"Because that's how Lestat came back to life. Louis forgot to scatter his ashes."

Nick shook his head, dismissing it. "Natalie, that's just not true. It's fiction. Anne Rice isn't one of us--at least I don't think so."

"But what if it is true, Nick? You said LaCroix taught you everything he knew. Well, how do you know he didn't keep something back? Some secrets, some knowledge, that would keep him more powerful?" Her eyes were suddenly filled with worry.

Nick took the book from her hands, setting it back on the desk. "You're reading too many horror stories. LaCroix is dead. He's no threat to me any more."

He'd convinced her for now. But as he led her from the office, he could not help but feel uneasy as he tried to shake the doubt that she had planted in his mind. It was all fiction--wasn't it?

"If anyone ever told me I'd go grocery shopping..."

Nick shook his head as he carried the bag of red meat, fish, and other foods which he'd almost grown to enjoy over the last few weeks. Natalie followed close behind as they stepped into the elevator which led to his apartment in the old movie theater whose antique marquee still advertised, "It's a Wonderful Life". It was the sign itself, and the irony in its title, that had first attracted Nick to his home of three years. It had been his haven, his sanctuary, shielding him from the day with its thick, automatic shades, yet adorned with countless paintings of the brilliant star whose rays would mean certain death. Modest furnishings gave no indication of the immense wealth accumulated over ten lifetimes, while the various works of art and musical instruments strewn about betrayed a talent cultivated over centuries.

Nick paused at the door, stopping short so that Natalie nearly ran into him. "What's the matter?" she asked.

"There's someone here," he said ominously. "Another." A sudden chill overtook him as he sensed the presence, feeling it in his blood, as an age-old connection beckoned him. It couldn't be...

He stood ready as the door slid open, prepared to shield Natalie from the One he feared he would find.

He sighed in relief at the figure that awaited him.

"Nicolas." Janette's lilting voice called to him as he entered, dropping the last "s" as she called him by his french name. She seemed to glide towards him, her short black silk skirt flowing, her lips brightly tinted the shade of blood, her blue eyes sparkling against the whiteness of her face, her smooth neck, and bare shoulders. A hand gloved in black lace reached out to take his, as she kissed him on the lips--an act natural to them for centuries, which suddenly made him feel uncomfortable as Natalie stepped through the door.

"Oh, hello, Natalie," Janette said sweetly, her fingertips still resting possessively on Nick's hand. She glanced at Nick, a mischievous twinkle in her eye. "Perhaps I should have called first."

"It's okay," Nick told her gently, feeling suddenly uneasy. He could feel Natalie's eyes behind him, and knew how awkward this must be for her. **It's awkward for <u>me</u>.**

"I just came to invite you to a little party at the Raven this Saturday..."

"What's the occasion?" he asked as he separated from her to lay the groceries on the table.

"Nicolas, I can't believe you've forgotten. March 15."

Nick smiled, then looked sheepishly to Natalie's inquiring expression. "My birthday."

"Not just any birthday. Your eight-hundredth. You were born in 1194."

Nick let out a breath. "That's right. I haven't even thought of it in years."

She looked at the red meat packet he'd pulled out of the bag. "Well, I thought that since you've been trying so

hard lately to become human, you might as well start celebrating birthdays again." There was the slightest touch of a jest in her voice, but he knew the idea itself was genuine. "I've invited all our old friends,"--she looked at Natalie--"and of course, you can bring your mortal friends. I'll make sure everyone is on good behavior."

"Thanks," he said, squeezing her hand. "We'll be there. Right, Nat?"

"Sure," she replied, forcing a smile. "It's not every day you get to go to an 800th birthday party." She was trying not to be obvious as she looked Janette over, quietly seething as Nick's immortal companion held protectively on his arm. "Uh, Nick, I think I'll wait for you upstairs. I want to freshen up a bit."

"Natalie, wait--"

"Nice seeing you, Janette."

Nick turned to follow her up the stairs, as Janette molded herself against his back, wrapping her arms around his chest as she liked to do. "Doesn't your little mortal plaything know about us, Nicolas?" she purred against his neck.

"She's no plaything, Janette," he responded, watching her disappear into his bedroom.

"Poor Nicolas, you're not in love again, are you?"

"Yes," he replied softly, unmoving, unconsciously holding his hand over hers.

"Why torture yourself, Nick?" She lay her head against his neck, holding him as if to comfort him. "You know what always happens."

His armour was the latest in late fifteenth century design, his horse one of the finest in Castille's royal stables. He smiled at María Eva as she came towards him, her rich velvet gown touching the floor, making her seem to float as she approached. Her dark brown hair was flowing in the breeze of the cool spring night as she wrapped her arms around his neck. He kissed her hungrily, pulling away before his vampiric hunger could surface.

"I wish you did not have to go," she told him in spanish.

"I must," he replied in the language it had taken him seventy years to master as a native. "Just remember that I love you."

She blushed, then reached for something in her pocket. "I want you to wear this. So the Lord will protect you and bring you home safely to me." She opened her hand to reveal an ornate gold crucifix, its center bejeweled with a brilliant red ruby.

Nick tried to fight the nausea that the cross had engendered in him, and was surprised when he could look at it. María Eva placed it around his neck, and he was thankful for the thick armour which would keep it from burning his skin.

"I love you," she said, closing her eyes as she hugged him tightly. "Please come back to me, Nicolás."

He kissed her on the neck, fighting the evil urges that this closeness would soon bring upon him...

"Not this time," he said, distracted. He turned gently around to face her, allowing her to retain her closeness to him. "Janette, I want it to work this time. Please, help me."

"How, Nicolas? What do you want me to do?"

He took her face in his hands. "Don't make her feel uncomfortable."

"I wasn't trying to. I can't change the bond between us--the connection we share. It's too old, and too deep. Would you try to deny it? Nous avons le même sang..."

His smile betrayed his warmth. "I couldn't deny it if I tried. But she's not one of us. She doesn't understand. I don't want to hurt her."

"Very well. I'll **try** to control myself," she promised, but her playful expression gave him his doubts.

"Thanks." He kissed her, a lingering sensuous kiss that in ages past had led to a most unholy consummation. He pulled away before those feelings could resurface.

"Would what you could share with her be so much better than what we've had?" she challenged him with a wistful smile.

"Just different," he told her, not wanting for anything in the world to hurt her. "It's what I want--and need. And it's something that unfortunately you and I could never have together."

"Nicolas, you almost make me wish I were mortal again," she said softly, then added with a wink, "Almost."

She kissed him again as she stepped away to leave. "You go play, Nicolas. Spend a lifetime with her if you wish. Just remember that in the end-- à nous l'éternité."

Maybe so, Janette, he thought to himself as he watched her go. **But maybe not. Only God will decide. And time.**

Nick found Natalie sitting on his bed, her coat still on. Her face betrayed her hurt, and he knew at once that she had witnessed some or all of what had transpired between him and Janette. He felt suddenly ashamed, for although he knew his own feelings, Natalie could not possibly understand the nature of his relationship with Janette. He knelt to eye level before her. "Hey, don't you think you should take your coat off?"

She shook her head. "I'm not staying."

He felt suddenly anxious, aware that he had caused her pain, and might lose her for it. "Natalie, I'm sorry, I know this is an awkward situation--"

"Awkward?! Nick, I'm sorry, I've just never been involved in a love triangle before--and certainly not one where the other woman's a vampire--"

"You're not involved in one now," he assured her.

"Oh, come off it, Nick." She stood, walking towards the door, then turned back to face him. "There's a passion between you. Anyone can see it a mile away."

"It's a different kind of passion, Natalie. A passion for blood, not love." He stepped closer to her, placing his hands on her arms. "What you and I share, what we hope to share, is something I've never had with Janette, and never could."

"Do you love her?" she challenged, although unsure she wanted to hear the answer.

He thought about it. "In a way. But not as I love you. She and I are connected, as progeny of LaCroix."

"Oh yes. You 'share the same blood'."

He looked at her in surprise.

"I still remember my high school french," she told him, then looked suddenly embarrassed. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to listen--"

"It's all right," he broke in quickly. "I have no secrets from you."

She didn't want to be angry, and the tenderness in his voice was forcing her to relent. "Nick, it's just really difficult for me...I guess...I just don't want to share you..."

"Natalie, I'm yours alone. You know that." His blue eyes were so intense, so sincere...she wondered if it was the vampire in him that was mesmerizing her...or her own love for him.

"I know," she replied wearily, wishing she could express what she was feeling. "But Janette seems to think that I'm just some fling you'll have for forty years or so...it makes me feel so...temporary...insignificant..."

She could see a desperation in his eyes as he squeezed her arms, imploring, "Natalie, listen to me. What we have is the most **significant** thing that's happened to me in eight hundred years. I don't know how to make you believe that--you'll just have to trust me. I swear to you, that if I have anything to say about it, the only eternity I'll have is the one we share together in some other life, after we've grown old and grey together in this one. Now would you please take off your coat?" He paused, his face betraying his distress. "You're making me very nervous."

She had to smile, at his sincerity, at his very human worry that something would go wrong between them. It was that pretty smile he loved, that made her large blue eyes sparkle. He joined her, relief washing over him as he realized that he had gotten through to her.

"Okay," she said, allowing him to help her off with her coat. She wrapped her arms around his neck, bringing her face close to his. "Now, why don't you put your money where your mouth is?"

"Gladly," he whispered, and kissed her hungrily.

It was night. Most of the battle-weary soldiers had

long since retired, their makeshift tents all in a row on the hill overlooking the last Muslim stronghold in Spain--Granada. King Ferdinand looked down on the sleeping city, a confident smile on his face as he patted his next-in-command on the back. "Yes, Nicolás," he said in a voice that betrayed his optimism. "Tomorrow we will take Granada. And the Reconquista will be complete. The Queen will be elated."

"As will we all, Vuestra Majestad," Nicolás de la Noche replied with the same sureness. The King bid him good night, and he was left alone in the quiet of the warm night.

And perhaps God will be pleased as well, he thought to himself. Suddenly, a chill ran down his spine, as he sensed ...something. He turned to see LaCroix standing before him.

"Ah, war, bloodshed. I can see why you came here, Nicholas. Every night a feast."

The peace he had felt moments before had vanished, replaced with anger. "Why are you here?"

"I'm curious, Nicholas. Why would you fight with men who bear the cross?"

His face was grim. "We all have our own crosses to bear, haven't we?"

LaCroix laughed. "The only cross I bear is my name--LaCroix. Or would it be LaCruz here? Ironic twist of fate, wouldn't you say?"

"It is you who are twisted, LaCroix," he responded disdainfully. "I've come here to escape from the evil that you cursed me with. Perhaps," he paused, "to find some redemption."

"As one of Queen Isabel's greatest knights?" he asked in disbelief. "Reliving your days in the Crusades? Wake up, Nicholas. This isn't the thirteenth century anymore, and you're not a crusader. What would your precious Queen say if she knew that you couldn't even bear to gaze upon a crucifix without feeling ill?" At Nicholas' silence, he went on, a sly expression on his face.

"What would María Eva say?"

Nick awoke abruptly, a cold chill running down his spine. He felt Natalie stirring in his arms, and relaxed, wrapping his arms protectively around her. The dream had been so real, his terror as palpable as it had been five hundred years ago. But LaCroix is dead, he told himself. Why does he still haunt me?

"Nick?"

Natalie looked sleepily up at him from the spot where she was nestled in the crook of his arm. "Is it night already?"

"No." He ran his fingers lovingly through her curly light brown hair. "It's okay. Go back to sleep. I just...had a bad dream."

Natalie lifted herself up on her elbow, suddenly concerned. "About what?"

He sighed wearily. "My nightmares are always the same. I'm on the verge of coming over--and LaCroix is there to prevent me. This time it was Spain, five hundred years ago." To her questioning gaze, he went on.

"After Joan of Arc died, I left France. I was so impressed by her faith. I began to believe that she'd been right--that it wasn't too late for me to regain my faith."

"She was right," Natalie told him tenderly, caressing his cheek.

He put his hand over hers, turning to look into her eyes. "Yes. But not then. I wasn't strong enough. I had no patience, and I wanted everything too fast. I fought in the **Reconquista**, killing 'in the name of the Church', even wearing a cross that burned my skin if I touched it. I even fell in love with a young girl who had no idea what I was--" He stopped abruptly, not wanting to hurt her by going on.

"It's okay," she reassured him. "Tell me about her."

"Her name was María Eva. But there's not much to tell," he said stonily. "LaCroix destroyed...everything. Like he always does."

"He can't destroy us, Nick," she told him, and he smiled.

"I know. I guess I'm just on edge because things were never so good for me before." He looked at her lovingly, feeling his concern melt away in her gaze. "Come here," he whispered, gathering her into his arms. "Just let me hold you. You make me feel so warm..."

"Probably because my body temperature is 98.6," she said as she nibbled at his ear. "Yours is still about ten degrees lower."

"Oh no. I know it's something else," he replied mischievously as he buried himself in the soft scent of her skin. Nick let his cares dissolve in her warmth as his lips caressed her, tasted her, explored her. For the first time in centuries he could feel the blood as it surged through his veins, his heart pumping faster with excitement, his body responding to the new desire that had begun to consume him. He found himself pulling her closer, fondling her, reaching below her nightshirt...

...and he forced himself to pull away reluctantly. "Natalie, I want you so badly," he breathed. "But I'm afraid to lose control. What if--?"

"Don't be afraid," she said softly, looking deeply into his eyes. "I'm not."

He looked at her a moment, smiling as she ran her fingertips along the edge of his black satin robe, lightly caressing his chest, his stomach, stopping to rest her hand on his bare waist. He pulled her down on top of him, kissing her...

...and the phone rang.

"This is Nick Knight. I'm either in bed or incommunicado..."

"Or both," Natalie cooed. "Ignore it," she commanded him.

Nick was inclined to agree, pulling the red satin sheets over them to shield them from the outside world. Then the message came through.

"Nick, this is Schanke. Stonetree's looking all over for Natalie. A body was found outside Skydome--totally drained of blood. Sound familiar? He needs an autopsy pronto, before this leaks to the press. I'm just taking a guess Natalie's with you." His tone became teasing. "Hope I'm not interrupting anything. Hasta la bye bye."

The interruption had done more than destroy the mood. Natalie could feel Nick's entire body tense as he sat up in bed, his eyes filled with something she had never seen there--terror. "It's him," he said with conviction.

"Nick, it can't be," she said, rising to sit beside him. "It could be any other vampire in Toronto--"

"Natalie, you don't understand. None of us would be that careless. It's him. And it's a warning."

Nick's fear had begun to grip her. She had never seen him like this before, and it frightened her to think of him as being afraid of anything. "Look, Nick, maybe it's not even a vampire at all. Once I've examined the body..."

"Nat, please don't go," he begged her.

"I have to. You heard Schanke. The Captain--"

"--can wait," he told her, his hands on her shoulders. "Please, wait until sunset, and I'll go with you."

"I'll be all right," she promised, breaking away gently. She reached for her clothes, putting them on despite his protests. When she had dressed, she put her arms around his neck. "Nick, I'll be all right. After all, if it is a vampire, nothing can happen to me in the daytime anyway."

He sighed, his concern somewhat allayed. "I guess you're right. I'm just worried about you. Promise you'll stay in the precinct until I get there. I'll come in right after sundown."

"Okay," she agreed, and he slipped his arms around her waist.

"Besides, this was really rotten timing."

"You can say that again," she said, kissing him.

He held her for a long moment, trying not to think about what had almost transpired between them. He failed miserably.

"We'll have time," she assured him, as if reading his mind.

He nodded as he reluctantly released her. "Be careful. Please."

Hours later, Nick sighed with relief as he entered her office to find her sitting at her desk. She looked up, and offered him a tired smile. "I told you I'd make it through the day without you," she teased.

"Thanks a lot," he said, feigning hurt, as she rose to meet him.

"That doesn't mean I didn't miss you," she confided as she kissed him.

He held her protectively, glad that no one was around and he could show her how relieved he was to see her unharmed. His face became serious as he released her. "What did you find out?"

She picked up her report, handing it to him, her eyes now betraying her own concern. "I think you're right," she told him. "Everything matches the attack on the museum security guard last year--the wounds, even down to the threads of a very old black fabric that got caught in the finger nails during a struggle."

He looked over her report, briefly, her words alone having convinced him already that what he had been sensing was real. He looked up at her. "How, Natalie? How could he have survived?"

She shook her head. "Hey, this is your domain, not mine. I'm not sure I understand how a vampire lives in the first place."

He laid the report down on her desk. "Natalie, I have to go to the Raven." He took her hand, adding quickly, "It's not what you think. Janette is the only other person around who can sense him as I do. She may have heard something, or have some idea how this could be possible..."

"It's okay, you don't have to explain anything," she assured him.

He nodded, her understanding giving him one less thing to worry about. But her safety was a more pressing issue than ever. "Natalie, please wait for me here. Or better yet, in the precinct building."

"I have to give Stonetree my report."

"I'll take you there, and tell him I'm following a lead. That is what I'm doing, after all." He looked at her. "What exactly will you tell Stonetree?"

She shrugged in frustration. "Everything--except who we think killed him. One more murder for the unsolved cases file."

"Little comfort for the victim's family," he murmured, shuddering at the anguish that the loss and unanswered questions would bring. Natalie knew he must be thinking of the grief he himself had caused over the centuries. The guilt would weigh heavy on his soul for as long as he lived. She took his hand.

"Come on. Let's go," she said quietly.

Nick found Janette sitting alone at the bar, sipping from a wine glass as she watched her half-human, half-vampire clientele dancing side by side under the dim lights. She smiled as she saw him, extending her hand for his kiss.

"What brings you here alone, Nicolas?" she asked playfully. "Where's your...girlfriend?"

"At the precinct," he replied, flashing her a smile as

he sat beside her. His face became serious. "Janette, we need to talk...about LaCroix."

Janette's light eyes widened. "Have you been...sensing him, too?"

"Yes," he told her, knowing that he probably had all along. "But it's more than that. There's been a killing. His style."

"That puts us all in danger," she said pensively, drawing blood from her glass. She looked up at him. "Especially you."

"Then...you think he's alive? Janette, how is it possible? I killed him--"

"I don't know, Nick," she said, shaking her head. "But I've come to realize over the last couple of centuries that there were many things LaCroix didn't teach us. Maybe it was his way of always keeping us under his control." She moved closer to him, as if she were afraid someone might overhear. "You know, I always did wonder why the Enforcers never came after you killed LaCroix. It is against the Code to murder another of our kind, especially one's own sire."

He thought a moment. "I'd always assumed it was because word had gotten back to them that it was in self-defense."

"So had I," she agreed. "After all, he'd broken the Code himself by committing that murder and leaving his victim in a public place. Yet still, haven't you ever wondered why they didn't even come to investigate?

Nick drew a deep breath. "Are you saying you think the Enforcers didn't come after me--because LaCroix never died?"

She didn't need to answer him. The fear on her face betrayed her thoughts, as the loud dance music filled their silence.

Finally, she reached her hand up to his cheek. "Nicolas, if he is alive, we must be prepared to face him together."

"We will," he promised, putting his hand over hers.

"But how? My love, you are more...mortal now than one of us," she said disdainfully.

"Janette, I'm so close to having what I always wanted--"

"But the time is wrong, Nicolas," she said with an edge of desperation in her voice. "If you want to play human, even live a lifetime out as one of them, then do it. But not now..."

"It's not a game, Janette," he replied, annoyed. "This is the life I want. I thought you of all people understood and respected that."

She sighed, moving her face to within an inch of his. "I do, Nicolas. But I need you, too. Through the centuries we have always been together. If you ever do become one of them..."

She began to kiss him, hungrily, passionately, trying to awaken in him what he knew now she could not. He pulled gently away, taking her face in his hands, his voice tender. "Janette, I know you're afraid of being alone. But if you

truly love me, as we have loved each other, then you'll let me go and live as I've chosen to. Even if I were to become completely human, it wouldn't change the bond between us. I will always be here for you--"

"Until you die," she broke in, measuring her words. "That's what this is, Nick. A death sentence. Is living as a human for fifty years or so worth that? Is Natalie worth that?"

"I wanted this before Natalie. You know that," he replied. "But yes, she is worth it. I love her, Janette. And we've come so far--I've come so far--towards a normal life."

"And what is normal, Nicolas?" she asked, running her fingers through his hair, lightly resting them on his neck. "A brief time to love, or an eternity? Which love is stronger, which bond runs deepest?" She put her lips to his neck, whispering, "Come back to me now, Nicolas. Drink of my blood and be strong again. And together we'll fight LaCroix..."

His heart was racing, yet the blood he could sense was hers. Her tongue was teasing his neck, and he shivered at the touch of her cool lips...and he thought of Natalie's warm lips touching him, tasting him, renewing him with life...and he pulled away. "No." His voice was gentle but firm.

She separated from him, but her eyes betrayed no anger--merely disappointment, and a bittersweet acceptance. "Then I have lost you."

He touched her cheek. "No. Not my feelings for you. But we can never consummate it like that again."

"Never is a dangerous word, Nicolas," she said with a twinkle in her eye. "But have it your way. If this is that important to you--if **she** is--I will respect that."

"Thank you," he said, giving her a kiss on the cheek. I knew I could count on you.

"I suppose we all grow a little mellow over the centuries," she commented, then sobered. "But we do still have a problem."

"Don't worry," he told her as he turned to leave. "I may not have all my powers, but I'm not exactly helpless."

Janette watched him leave, shaking her head. "I hope not, my love. I hope not."

"Señor de la Noche!"

Nick turned to see the young soldier who had addressed him. Miguel's eyes were filled with the fear Nick quickly recognized in mortals, a fear of the unknown.

"What it is, Miguel? Has something happened?"

"On the battlefield, near la Alhambra. Five moors were found dead--"

"I'm sure King Ferdinand left many more than that, Miguel," Nick said as he sheathed his own sword. "Many moors will die before Granada is free."

Miguel Velazquez shook his head vigorously. "You don't understand. Their bodies didn't fall by our swords--they were attacked by some animal...and drained of blood!"

Had Nick had more life in him, he might have paled. He found himself stammering something about beasts brought by the Moors from Africa, and Miguel left, more confused than reassured. Nick stood alone in the cool night air, deep in thought. It was LaCroix. It had to be. He'll never let me rest.

"They should be happy. I've limited my diet to their enemy...so far."

Nick turned in anger to see LaCroix, his eyes glowing amber, his fangs protruding.

"Why won't you leave me in peace?" Nick growled bitterly.

"There's no peace for the undead, Nicholas," his sire replied, as his eyes bore through to whatever was left of Nick's soul. "I do believe, however, that I'm in the mood for a spanish delicacy...perhaps a young woman."

Fear gripped Nick suddenly as he realized what LaCroix was alluding to. "No. Leave her alone."

LaCroix smiled, an evil smile, baring his fangs. "Nicholas, are you saying you care for this woman? María Eva..." He pronounced the name slowly, evenly, then added thoughtfully, "I was planning on going back to Castilla. Perhaps I'll call on her--"

The rage had erupted before Nick could even attempt to control it. His eyes were ablaze, his fangs extended, as he snarled, "Stay away from her, LaCroix! I'm warning you!"

"Not as human as you thought you were, eh Nicholas?"

The realization of what LaCroix had just done to him filled him with sudden despair. The glow faded from his eyes, replaced with an anguish centuries old.

"Don't hurt her, LaCroix. Please." His voice was weak, filled with defeat.

LaCroix just laughed, and was gone.

Nick could hear the echo of LaCroix's evil laughter as he came back to the present. And as his eyes roved across the crowded precinct, they focused on Natalie, off in the distance speaking to Stonetree. The old terror gripped him once more, for he knew LaCroix was near, and knew what he wanted. To destroy everything--his life here, his humanity...Natalie. The rage rose up in him at the thought. Not this time. Never again.

He moved towards Natalie, coming to her side as she finished the report to Stonetree.

The Captain was frowning. "Is it like the last time, a year ago? Same M.O.?"

Natalie shook her head as she handed over the report. "No. Completely different. The incisions are uneven, consistent with an animal bite."

"Couldn't be the same perp anyway, Captain," Nick broke

in. "He's still in jail. Schanke and I already checked it out."

"What happened to your lead?" Stonetree asked, turning to him.

"It didn't pan out," Nick responded.

Stonetree sighed in disgust, mumbling about what he would tell the press, then left.

Natalie turned to Nick, anxious to hear what he had found out. "Did Janette know anything? she asked quietly enough so that no one would hear.

"No. But we both suspect he's alive," he said in a hushed whisper.

"But how?"

Nick shrugged, still incredulous. "I don't know." He put his hands on her shoulders. "But Nat, if it is true, I can't let you out of my sight. Not at night."

"Nick, I was just going to go home. I'm exhausted," she complained. "Remember, you slept all day. I came in hours ago."

"Natalie, please!" His grip on her arms and the intensity in his eyes frightened her. "If he's alive, and he's seen us together, your life could be in danger. I won't let him hurt you."

"Okay," she relented, visibly shaken. "What do you want me to do?"

He sighed with relief, his grasp on her relaxing to an affectionate caress. "It's almost four. I'll ask the Captain if I can leave early, and I'll take you home." His voice softened as he leaned closer to her. "I'm sorry, Nat. I didn't mean to frighten you. It'll be all right. I swear to you that he'd have to destroy me before he could ever lay a hand on you." He kissed her tenderly on the cheek, whispering, "I love you," in her ear.

"I love you, too," she said softly. "But it's not me I'm worried about."

He kissed her again, this time on the lips, not caring about the interested looks they were getting from the night shift. His need to comfort her was greater. They separated as an officer stepped up to Nick.

"Detective, there's been another murder with the same M.O. This one by the CN Tower."

A chill ran down Nick's spine, and he turned to Natalie.

"I'm coming with you!" she told him. He nodded, taking her hand.

Schanke shook his head in disbelief as he stared at the mutilated body. The police photographer had just finished shooting the gruesome scene of a young dark-haired woman whose neck had been nearly ripped open.

"She looks about twenty-five," Natalie commented, kneeling by the body. She slipped on rubber gloves, lightly touching the wound. She glanced at Nick as she pushed the woman's blood-stained hair to the side, revealing the two tell-tale puncture wounds.

"She's been drained, hasn't she?" he asked quietly, disgusted by the waste of such youth and beauty.

Natalie nodded.

"It gets weirder," Schanke broke in, joining them. He held out a plastic bag. "They found this laid on top of the body. This guy's gotta be some real sicko."

Nick stood, reaching for the package, and stopped dead as he looked at it. Natalie would have sworn he'd turned pale.

"What is it?" she asked, standing.

"Some kind of bird," Schanke told her, then turned back to address one of the police officers on the scene.

Natalie looked at Nick, not understanding. "Nick?"

"It's a raven," he said emotionlessly. "A dead raven."

Nick and Natalie arrived at the Raven as the crowd was beginning to dissipate. At 4:00 a.m., sunrise was too close, and those who made this their haven had begun to head towards the lower chambers. They found Janette at the bar, unusually pensive as she sipped her customary blood-wine mixture. She stood abruptly as she saw them, giving Nick a perfunctory kiss on the cheek, then, remembering her promise to him, greeted Natalie warmly.

"It's gotten worse, Janette," Nick began.

"I'm way ahead of you," she replied, seeming anxious. She reached behind the bar, pulling out a note written in an ancient script.

"**All my children will pay for their betrayal,**" Nick read aloud.

"It was found in the lower chambers," she said slowly, clearly shaken. "Right where we sleep during the day."

He breathed deeply. "Then he **is** alive. That's why we could feel our connection to him so strongly." He looked up at Janette. "But why **you**? I tried to kill him. You never turned against him."

"Maybe because he knows you're close," Natalie suggested.

Janette nodded. "That...and more." She moved from behind the bar to face them. Nick could see at once something hidden behind her clear blue eyes, something that guilt, friendship and necessity would now bring to light. "I never told you this, Nick, but LaCroix asked me to help him trap you. He wanted me to lure you back here with Alyce Hunter, so that he could--", she searched for a word to describe their diabolical sire's intentions,"--**toy** with you, to make you come back to us." She looked into his eyes. "It was the first time I'd refused him anything. He swore I'd regret it."

Nick squeezed her hand. "Thank you. I'm just sorry he turned against you too."

"It was inevitable. He controlled us for centuries. The time had to come when we would both wish to break free of him. He could not accept that."

"Janette, there's something else. The reason we came here. Another body was found--apparently drained as the first. But there was a dead bird laid on top of the body." He caught her eyes. "A raven."

"LaCroix always did like symbolism," she muttered, not seeming jarred. The intrusion into her private lair had left her immune to further surprise. "Look, you'd better go. It's almost sunrise."

"Will you be all right?" Nick asked with concern.

"Everyone is on alert," she told them. "My retainers have searched the lower chambers...There's not much more that can be done. I'm just waiting for the sun to rise so we can have some peace." She paused, looking them both over. "And the two of you? Where will you go, Nicolas? He's seen your apartment. I wouldn't go there. Maybe you should spend the day here." She nodded to Natalie. "Both of you."

"It's okay. I'll go to Natalie's place." He took out a pen, scribbling down the number, and handed it to her. "Call me there if you need me."

Janette nodded, taking the number. "Nick, I'm just worried about tomorrow. Your party. Word's been out about it for two weeks now. If he's been in town, he'll have heard."

Nick forced a smile. "How many people did you invite to this anyway?"

Her tension eased for a moment. "It won't be so grand as the party Queen Isabel gave you--but it may come close," she teased.

Nick kissed her on the cheek. "Be careful."

"I still have my powers, Nicolas," she reminded him, trepidation crossing her face once more. "It's you who have to be careful."

Natalie had listened to their conversation without comment, still not quite comfortable in the presence of Nick's ageless companion. Now, as they raced in his Caddy against the coming dawn, she put a hand on the back of his neck, rubbing at the anxiety which was clearly plaguing him.

"That feels good," he said pushing his head back to meet her caress.

"Nick, is it true what Janette said about your powers? Are they completely gone?"

He frowned. "I'm...not sure. But Nat, if they are, that only means I'm more human. Isn't that what we want?"

"Of course it is," she assured him. "I'm just worried about the possibility of your having to fight LaCroix."

He smiled, though she knew he was trying to hide his own concern for her sake. "Hey, you're beginning to sound like Janette...the two of you must think I'm some kind of weakling..."

"Of course, I don't, it's just--"

"Come here," he said, gathering her towards him with his right arm, driving with his left. She nestled gladly in the crook of his arm, putting her arm around his waist. "There. Now we both feel safer."

For a few moments, they were both quiet, enjoying the contact. But there was something on Natalie's mind, and she couldn't relax until she asked. "Nick, Janette doesn't approve of your trying to come over, does she?"

"Janette never has," he replied tiredly. "She's always tried to seduce me back to the dark side--" He stopped, realizing that perhaps "seduce" wasn't the smartest word to use.

"Now I know where the word 'vamp' came from," she commented, then looked straight at him. "Did she try to seduce you back tonight? The first time you went to the Raven?"

Damn her intuition! "Uh, what would make you think that?" he asked, averting her gaze.

"You've got too much blood flowing through your veins. You forget, you can blush now," she told him.

He could hear the tinge of amusement in her voice. At least she wasn't upset. "Okay," he relented. "She did try. But she's scared, Natalie. If I become human, she'll be left alone. Going through eternity alone is a frightening prospect. Believe me."

Natalie was silent for a moment, her silence unnerving him."What are you thinking?" he asked.

"Oh, just wondering exactly how hard she tried..." she replied.

He'd reached her house and pulled into a spot. He shut off the ignition and turned to her, holding her now in both arms. "She tried to kiss me--tempt me with her blood. She failed. I don't want that--couldn't have that--anymore. All I want is to be mortal--and to be with you. I love you. I told her that, and she respects my wishes."

"Does she really?" Natalie asked. "From what you've told me, she's always interfered--"

"Not this time," he promised her. "Janette and I have both...matured...a great deal. She's gone beyond that."

"I hope," Natalie responded.

"Come on, Nat. The sun's coming up. Let's forget about Janette, LaCroix, everything. And just enjoy the day together." He kissed her, silencing her concerns. "Now why don't we take this inside?" he whispered, and she assented, smiling.

As she locked the door behind them, she noticed him standing strangely, exerting force as if trying to lift up. At her questioning gaze, he smiled incredulously. "I can't fly. I can't even elevate myself!"

"That's incredible! When was the last time you tried?"

"I haven't." He swooped her into his arms, hugging her tightly. "One more step forward," he whispered.

"Make that two," she said, glancing down at his feet, where Sidney, her cat, was rubbing against him, purring. Nick laughed, picking up the chubby feline, petting him. "Not afraid of me anymore, are you, Sidney?" he asked. The

cat meowed in response, purring as Nick tickled him under the neck. "There hasn't been a cat that hasn't shied away from me in seven hundred and sixty-five years," he told Natalie, amazed that he even remembered how to play with one.

Natalie was smiling broadly, thrilled for him, for herself...even for Sidney. Suddenly everything seemed to pale in the revelations that Nick was making tonight. She moved closer, kissing him deeply, as a promise of what was to come. "Why don't I let Sidney entertain you while I take a shower and freshen up."

"Okay, but I think I'm going to have to raid your refrigerator. Suddenly I'm starving..."

"Humans aren't supposed to eat too much right before they go to sleep," she reminded him playfully.

He kissed her again. "Who says I'm going to sleep?"

Natalie showered quickly, relaxing under the hot stream of water, washing away all her concerns...What was it she had been afraid of? All that mattered at this moment was Nick, and the progress he was making, **they** were making...She towel-dried her hair, letting it fall loosely about her shoulders, taking an extra moment to use the perfumed dusting powder she'd gotten for Christmas, smoothing it in all the right places. She pulled on her bathrobe, but looking at herself in the mirror, knew it wasn't quite right. She peeked through the crack in the bathroom door. Nick had already changed into the black silk pajamas he'd left here, the ones that made him look oh so sexy, and was sitting on her couch. Quickly, she slipped into her bedroom, heading for the lingerie drawer.

There it was. When Grace and the others had given it to her for her birthday, she hadn't imagined when she'd ever use it, but she knew the time was right. She slipped on the black lace teddy for the first time, almost shocking herself by how little it covered. Low-cut in front, g-string in back..."It's a good thing they bought this for you, Nat, because you'd never have had the nerve to pick it out yourself," she mumbled as she examined herself in the mirror. It might not exactly be her, but she had to admit it looked good. She reached into her drawer for a short black silk robe, feeling a little more comfortable once it was on. **There. If he wants to see it, he'll have to work at it.** A touch of perfume, a light lipstick, a dab of eyeliner under her lashes...she was ready. She breathed deeply, trying to control the way her heart was beating, and the arousal that was coursing through her body just at the thought of him...

She found him sprawled on the couch, Sidney sleeping at his side, flicking through television stations with the remote control. His eyes opened wide as he saw her, and he stood, dropping the remote to the floor. "Uh, Nat, you look radiant..."

She smiled as he took her into his arms, kissing her hungrily. He held her in a long embrace, saying, "Do you know that when I hold you the rest of the world seems to disappear?"

She knew the feeling well. "Let me close the blinds, and then you can hold me for the rest of the day," she told him, breaking away.

He watched her, no, admired her, as she went to the window, shutting out the rays of sunlight that had begun to peek over the horizon.

"Did you have something to eat?" she asked as she drew the curtains over the venetian blinds for added protection.

"Yeah, I hope you don't mind, I finished your leftover pizza."

"No, I don't--wait, Nick, you ate the pizza?" She turned to him in sudden shock, concern clouding her face. "That pizza was loaded with garlic! Are you all right?"

He shrugged. "Yeah. I don't feel anything strange." A thought struck him suddenly, and he came to her, his hand, so warm now, resting on hers as she held the draw-string to her drapes. "Natalie, let's try something. Open the blinds."

"Nick, no. You don't know if you're ready for that--"

"I'll never know until I try."

"I won't let you take a chance."

"Nat, it'll be all right. Just let the sunlight in, and if it even begins to burn, I'll run into the shade, and you can shut the blinds."

Natalie shook her head. "No, Nick. It's too dangerous--"

"Hey, the worst that can happen is I'll set your smoke alarm off," he said with a grin.

"Nick, this isn't funny--"

His face sobered. "Please, Nat. So many things have happened; I have to know. It's the only way I'll feel truly free."

She knew she couldn't stop him. Better to let him try when she was there to help him, than take a chance that he'd attempt it on his own. She nodded, and slowly pulled the shades back.

The east had already turned shades of red and orange as the slightest edge of the fiery globe had begun to make its way over the horizon. It was that dangerous period between night and day when vampires raced to safety. Nick stood in the window defiantly, waiting, hoping, as Natalie grasped his hand to support him, protect him if the need arose. Slowly the sky became lighter, until Jupiter, the bright diamond in the western sky, had disappeared into a sea of blue. The refracted red light dissipated just as the cursed red blood from his veins. The sun rose in all its splendor, a yellow-white symbol of light and life. Day had broken.

Nick stood still for a moment, gripping Natalie's hand more tightly as the warm rays touched his face, his body. Tears, real salt water tears, began to wash slowly down his face as he lived his first sunrise in seven hundred and sixty-five years.

He pulled Natalie to him, hugging her to him, then swinging her around in pure ecstasy. "Natalie...I'm human," he said simply, his voice choked with emotion.

"Yes you are," she whispered, her tears of joy joining his. She held him tightly as he watched the sun rise higher into the eastern sky, amazed, delighted, grateful.

"You brought me to this, Natalie," he told her, still clutching at her as if afraid to let go. "It's only fitting you share my first sunrise with me..."

"Not just the first," she whispered, kissing him.

"No," he replied tenderly. "Every one, for the rest of our lives." He pulled slowly away from her, holding her at arm's distance. "Natalie, you're even more beautiful in the sun light. Look at how it shines in your eyes, on your hair. If you knew how much I love you--"

"Show me," she told him simply.

And he kissed her, more hungrily than before, more passionately, for now he knew he was truly free to love her. His lips moved slowly down the hollow of her neck, as his hands moved up the smoothness of her legs, under her robe. Natalie smiled to herself as he seemed to hesitate as he reached the bare skin beneath, probably wondering if she was wearing anything at all underneath. His hands rested on her buttocks, pulling her gently against him, and Natalie gasped as she felt him hardening against her, knowing that through her teddy and his pajamas he must still feel the heat emanating from her. Suddenly, he was lifting her up, carrying her to the bed, laying her gently down.

She looked up at him, smiling as she reached to help him off with the pajama top that had already slipped open to reveal the perfect, muscular chest. Her fingers danced along the patch of blond hair, down to his stomach, then playfully touching him over his pajama bottoms.

Nick was not so modest. His desire and curiosity had gotten the better of him, and as he lay next to her, he reached at once for the belt of her robe, pulling it loose to expose the black teddy below. "Oh, Natalie," he moaned, in appreciation of what he saw, and what she was doing. He ran his fingers along the line of the teddy, pushing it aside gently to cup her breast in his hand, caressing her, playing with her, arousing her. Natalie sighed in pleasure as moments later he let his tongue continue the exploration as his hands moved back to her buttocks, squeezing, fondling, until his fingers traced the line back to front, his touch making her tremble as he approached, reaching underneath the thin lace to undo the single snap that kept him from her. Natalie moaned as he touched her gingerly, then more anxiously, watching him smile as he realized just how much she wanted him. His lips found hers again as he kissed her, feeling her quiver with excitement beneath him. Natalie remained passive for a few moments, reveling in his caress, experiencing pleasure as she never had before. This man, who had lived for centuries, had learned to appreciate a woman, to take his time with her, to pleasure her before

himself...and she knew that all he had hoped for, longed for, in his hundreds of years of solitude, would be hers to enjoy. And as the burning within her became almost too intense to bear, she reached with both hands for his pajama bottoms, setting him free.

And as she held him, fondled him, she drew in a breath as she realized...the extent of his ardor. Nick began to kiss her again, his whole body shaking with anticipation as the warm touch of her hands drove him insane. He wrapped his arms around her as she guided him into her, welcoming him, warming him...

And nearly eight centuries of detachment, of isolation, melted away in the heat of their passion, as their bodies moved together in a desperate fulfillment of two years of frustrated longing. With skilled, yet careful hands, he pulled her closer to him in swift, sharp movements, allowing himself to reach as deeply as possible into the heat of her very soul. Nick struggled to contain the explosion he felt was imminent, listening to her breathing, her heartbeat, waiting for that moment when they could share in their moment of ecstasy. And as she began to cry out, he allowed himself to erupt inside her, releasing all the desire for her that he'd repressed for so long. And as their bodies relaxed, molding into each other, they continued to hold each other tightly, she, relishing in the completeness of having him inside her, he in the warmth of her still-quavering body.

Natalie awoke from her most peaceful sleep in ages, reaching for the warm body that had held her in his arms for hours...to find him missing. Her heart stopped a beat as her eyes fluttered open...then she relaxed back on her pillow, smiling. She watched him as he stood before the window, transfixed by the daylight and all its wonder, letting the warm rays of sunlight bathe his naked body. And she could feel her desire burning once more just at the sight of his body: soft blond hair, pale skin, muscular arms, tight buttocks, athletic form...perfect. She rose quietly, still wearing the teddy he'd merely pushed aside, slipping her arms around his waist, kissing him on the back of the neck. For a moment he stood with her around him, covering her hands lovingly with his own. Then he turned around to face her, smiling, taking her into his arms. "Good morning, my love," he whispered as he gave her a tender kiss.

"I'd say it's a wonderful morning," she replied, lacing her fingers around his neck, then continuing the kiss. It felt so good to be in his embrace, to feel the bare skin of his chest against hers. He pulled her closer and she realized that he too was aroused, and the touch of him against her excited her even more.

"I got up to look at the day," he said softly. "There are so many things I want to do with you outside in the

sunlight...But I couldn't stop thinking about this morning..."

She smiled. He didn't have to tell her what he'd been thinking of. "Well, you have two choices then. We can get dressed now, go out for breakfast, and spend the day outside..."

"What's the second choice?" he breathed as he tasted her neck.

"We can do that all in a couple of hours."

"I like that idea..." he replied as his mouth moved downward.

Nick and Natalie lay contentedly in each other's arms for a long while, bathing in the afterglow of a lovemaking session that had been no less intense than their first. "I love you," he whispered, running his fingers through her hair as she snuggled close to him.

"I love you, too," she replied, reaching up to kiss him.

He looked into her eyes. "Natalie, this is all...incredible."

"For me, too. Nick, you were so gentle and caring..."

"Were you expecting some kind of wild beast?" he teased.

She laughed. "No, just a typical selfish man."

He hugged her more tightly. "Well, maybe once upon a time I was like that--more of a taker. Maybe I'm still afraid of that beast coming out...of losing control."

She sensed his body tense, and reached up to his face, caressing it. "Hey, if your beast didn't come out in the last few hours, it never will again."

He smiled, loosening up, accepting her kiss. "I'll tell you one thing, Nat. You absolutely wore me out. I could sleep all day."

"Hmmmm, too tired for the Natalie Lambert Official Tour of Toronto by day?"

His eyes brightened at the prospect, as she knew they would. "I think I'll stay awake today. I've slept through too many days."

The images flashed rapidly through his mind...hundreds of thousands of sunrises, heated escapes, near misses...the sizzle of burning skin, the acrid smell of smoking flesh, pain...fear of death...imminent death...the cool retreat into darkness...despair...condemnation to a nocturnal existence...

...and freedom. Nick grasped Natalie's hand, took a deep breath, and stepped through the front door, letting the crisp air invigorate him as the sun shone benevolently above them...

"Let's ride with the top down," he suggested.

"In March?"

But she could not deny the innocent plea from his blue eyes.

"You're lucky it's a nice day," she told him as she snuggled next to him for warmth.

Their first stop had been the CN tower, and Nick waited impatiently as the elevator slowly brought them to the top. "This is so slow..." he whispered to her.

"Just compared to flying," she answerd in his ear.

The elevator stopped and Nick anxiously followed the crowd towards the window where he could observe what he never had before--Toronto by day. "It looks so different..." he marveled, seeing the sun shine on the view he'd only seen by moonlight. Suddenly, he stepped back, seemingly dizzy.

"What's the matter?" Natalie asked with concern as he grabbed her arm for support.

His head cleared and he smiled sheepishly. "I'd almost forgotten--before I was brought over, I had a terrible fear of heights! I guess that now that I can't fly, it's back!"

They'd taken a tour of Skydome and its many facilities, stopping at the Hard Rock Cafe for lunch. Nick sat back contentedly after downing his rare cheeseburger and fries, listening to the music as his gaze rested appreciatively on Natalie. The loud music in the background had flowed into a more sedate number, Duran Duran's "Ordinary World". Nick listened to the words a moment, then took Natalie's hand. "Have I found my way to the ordinary world, Nat?"

She smiled. "I always knew you would."

The check came, and Natalie snatched it from him.

"Uh, Nat, isn't this a date?" he asked, trying to pull it from her.

"It's your **birthday**," she reminded him. "I've been with you every free minute over the past week, so I haven't had time to get you a present yet."

"This day has been my present," he told her as they stood to leave. "Thank you, my love." He took her into his arms. She was the best gift of all.

The park was filled with children taking advantage of the warm March day. For a moment Natalie shuddered as she realized that the last time she had been here had been with Roger Jameson. Nick noticed her expression at once. "Are you all right?"

She smiled, feeling his arm around her shoulder, seeing his concerned gaze, remembering that that last time it had been Nick she'd been thinking of. And here he was. "I'm fine," she said, lacing her arm more tightly around his waist.

"Hey, look, Nat!" He pointed to a tourist, taking polaroid pictures of her family against the backdrop of

scenery. Before Natalie knew his plan, he'd pulled her towards the woman. "Excuse me," he asked, his mortality not affecting his charisma. "Would you mind taking a picture of us? It's a special day, and we don't have a camera."

The middle-aged woman was too good-natured and impressed by Nick's handsome charm to refuse. Moments later, Nick had thanked her, and stood with Natalie watching their image come to life. The photo showed them arm in arm, both smiling broadly, having captured exquisitely the love and excitement flowing between them. "Our souvenir of our first day in the sun," he said, pocketing it. He took her into his embrace, kissing her.

"There's something I have to do, now, Nat. It's almost four, and I want to get back to you before sundown." To her curious expression, he responded with a mysterious, "It's a secret. A surprise."

Despite her desire to stay with him, she relented, letting him take her home. After all, she was dead tired, and if she was going to look beautiful for his party tonight, she'd need some time alone to get ready.

He's the one in for a surprise when he gets back, she thought to herself as she watched him drive away.

She'd originally bought the dress for the Annual Metro Police Ball, wanting more than anything for Nick to see her in it. But when he'd decided not to go, it hadn't seemed worth the effort. She'd put it carefully away for another occasion. It would come in handy tonight. She hated herself for falling prey to her own jealousy, but considering that they were going to The Raven, she couldn't escape it.

She had to make sure she looked better than Janette.

She slipped on the royal blue satin, the sweetheart top fitting nicely over her breasts, wishing suddenly there were spaghetti straps to keep it from falling down. The skirt was a wrap around, falling just above her knees, opening ever-so-slightly as she walked. She stepped into the four-inch matching pumps, then stood in front of the mirror, grateful for the high-school friend that had been a hairdresser and taught her how to pin up her long thick curls just the way a strapless dress demanded. Diamond earrings, enough make-up for evening light...

...and the bell rang. She took a deep breath, quickly remembered the perfume, spraying it on her wrists, her neck, her cleavage...and went to greet him.

Nick shuffled nervously as he waited for her to come to the door, took a deep breath as she opened it...and simply stared at her. "Natalie..."

She reached out to him, finding him incredibly sexy in the black suit and powder blue shirt he'd changed into, his hair curling just the way she liked it. She kissed him hungrily, wishing they didn't have to leave for the Raven so soon.

"You look so beautiful," he said, as his lips moved down to her neck. He kissed her there, drinking in the scent of her perfume, her skin. He lifted his head up to face her. "I love your hair like this. You've got such a beautiful neck," he said, running his finger along its hollow.

"I guess that's a real compliment from you," she teased him, and he smiled.

He released her, standing silent for a moment, his smile taking on a suddenly nervous aspect.

"What is it?" she asked. "I didn't mean--"

"No, no, Nat," he reassured her. "It's not that, it's just, I have something I need to talk to you about."

Concern clouded her eyes. "Did something happen?"

"Why don't we sit down?" he suggested, motioning to the couch.

"Nick, please, whatever it is, just tell me." Suddenly the magic of the day had been obscured as she began to think once more of the danger that the coming sunset would bring them. Something had happened, she was sure.

Well, maybe not so sure. Nick had taken a deep breath, and was holding her hand in his, and suddenly she realized that it wasn't fear intruding upon them once more, but something she couldn't identify. Whatever it was, he seemed a nervous wreck.

"Nat, I know you might think things are going a little fast between us," he began, "but we **have** known each other for a long time--and loved each other, even though we didn't admit it."

Natalie's lips parted as she gasped slightly. This couldn't be happening.

"Natalie, I've waited so long for this. There's no doubt in my mind that I want to spend the rest of my life with you..."

"Nor in mine," she told him softly.

He smiled, more at ease. "I don't want us to waste another moment. I want us to begin our life together." He reached into his pocket for the small black velvet box. "Officially."

Natalie was speechless, her hands trembling as she opened the small case, then gasped at its contents. The pear-shaped diamond was the biggest she had ever seen, easily three karats. As Nick gingerly took it out for her, she saw the ruby-lined setting, blood-red stones that led to the pure white jewel in the center.

"Natalie...will you marry me?"

Her eyes began to fill with tears of joy, and he knew her answer as she looked into his eyes. She said it anyway. "Yes. Yes, yes..." she whispered, and he gathered her into his arms, kissing her hungrily.

"Oh, Nat," he said, relief washing over him. "You don't know how happy this makes me..."

She rested against him, holding out her left hand as he placed the ring on her finger. "It's beautiful, Nick," she told him, her voice filled with emotion.

"I hope the ring's okay, Nat. I didn't really have a lot of time to shop around..."

She looked up at him. "You're kidding, right?"

But she could see from his face that he wasn't. "I guess I'm just used to the jewelry they wore in the Courts over the last few centuries. It seemed a lot fancier. If there's something you'd like more...Nat, anything and everything you want...just tell me. It's yours."

She caressed his cheek. "Nick, the ring's perfect. And I've got everything I want right here."

He kissed her, still in wonder at his ability to do so...no beast, no vampire...just a healthy mortal passion rising within him...

They made a conscious decision to ignore the ringing phone, until Schanke's voice spoke into the answering machine. "Hey, Nat, if Knight's there, tell him he's gonna be late to his own birthday bash. I'm still waiting for you guys to pick me up at the precinct..."

They separated, laughing. "I think we'd both better change our numbers, Nat..."

"...and not tell Schanke," she finished for him.

They stood up, and he gave her one last kiss. "We'll continue this later...with your phone off the hook."

He'd put the top up, partly for the cold night air, in part because Natalie warned the wind would destroy her hair. As he pulled up in front of the police station, she turned to him with sudden curiosity. "I never got a chance to ask you last night...what was that about Queen Isabel?"

"She was a lovely woman," Nick remembered fondly. "She and King Ferdinand were both very decent people. I fought at his side in Granada, and after the Reconquest of Spain, I spent a good deal of time in their Court."

"You knew the Catholic Kings?" she asked in disbelief.

"Oh, yeah," he said matter-of-factly. "The whole family was very nice. I could never forgive Henry VIII for what he did to the King's daughter, Catherine."

Natalie had still not gotten used to the fact that Nick had probably known a good deal of the historical figures she'd only read about. No wonder he thought her ring wasn't fancy enough. She made a mental note to ask him if he'd known all six of Henry VIII's wives.

"Anyway," he continued, "In 1492, we were in the midst of celebrating the unification...and someone told the Queen that it was my birthday...so she threw me a party..."

"Must have been some party," she commented.

"It was," he said thoughtfully.

Maria Eva was at his side as they made their way across the crowd to the King and Queen. Both dressed now in their finest garments, the King slapped him affectionately on the back, while the Queen extended a bejeweled hand for his kiss. The attention embarrassed Nick, for he knew that

others envied his close relationship with the monarchs. But he had fought valiantly at the king's side, and they had told him more than once that they owed Granada to him. He kissed the Queen's hand, bowing deeply, as Maria Eva curtsied.

"Are you enjoying your celebration, Nicolas?" the Queen asked, her warm blue eyes smiling at him.

"Very much so, Vuestra Majestad. Thank you again."

"Perhaps the next celebration will be your wedding?" Queen Isabel asked, glancing at Maria Eva, who was blushing profusely.

Nick smiled down at his love. It was a distinct possibility...

Nick forced himself back to the present. He was too happy at this moment to let the past intrude upon him. He was hoping for a happy ending this time, and didn't want to dwell on the past...

Even with the black leather coat covering her most revealing dress, Nick knew that all eyes were on Natalie as they entered the precinct. He put his arm around her possessively, brimming with his own excitement to let the world know that she was his. Schanke's eyes opened wide as he saw her, and as Stonetree came up behind him he said, "Well, Nat, you're gonna be the classiest looking dame in that weirdo club tonight."

"Thanks, Schank," she said, realizing that for him that was a real compliment.

"Sorry we're late, guys. I had to give Nat a little present--"

"Wait a minute, here. It's your birthday. What did she give you?"

Nick reached out for her left hand, caressing it tenderly as he brought it up to show them. "Her present to me was that she said 'yes'."

"Well, I'll be damned," Stonetree said with a big smile. "What a surprise!", he said as he shook Nick's hand, giving Natalie a kiss on the cheek. "Congratulations, you two!"

"Not to me," Schanke commented as he shook Nick's hand. "I practically got the two of them together, didn't I partner?"

"You did push a little," Nick admitted. "Although I'll never forgive you for trying to set her up with Lionel."

"It was all a ploy to get you jealous, right Nat?" he said, winking at her as he gave her a congratulatory kiss. He turned to Stonetree. "That's it, Captain. Now you're gonna have to take time off to come to the Raven--it's a double celebration."

"Okay, okay," Stonetree relented with a rare smile. "Let me grab my coat. The least I can do is buy my favorite detective and M.E. a bottle of champagne to celebrate."

"Hey, I thought I was your favorite detective," Schanke called after Stonetree. Nick just laughed, putting his arm

lovingly around Natalie as the officers nearby crowded around to congratulate them.

The Raven was more crowded than usual, and Nick knew at first glance that most of the patrons were vampires. He helped Natalie off with her coat, checking it along with his own, as Janette came to greet them.

"Nicolas. Happy Birthday!" She kissed him on the lips, giving him a strange smile as she separated from him. "You're so warm," she said so that the other men couldn't hear. She turned to Natalie. "Natalie, you're looking very nice. That's a lovely dress--Eaton's, isn't it? I shop there myself sometimes when I can't get a hold of my designer."

Natalie forced a smile, seething inside. Damn her for being so catty. And Nick was trying to tell her that Janette wasn't after him?

Nick shot Janette a glance, but was more amused than annoyed. "Uh, Janette, you know Schanke, and this is Captain Stonetree. Captain, Janette is the owner of The Raven. She's an old friend."

"Very old," Natalie muttered under her breath.

Janette greeted them with her usual charm, pointing out the table she had set aside for Nick and his friends, and inviting them to have drinks on her. Schanke and Stonetree headed towards the table, and Janette turned back to Nick.

"People will start thinking this is a regular cop bar," she joked, then looked at him incredulously. "Nicolas, I can actually sense the blood pulsing through your veins...this is incredible."

"A lot of incredible things have been happening lately, Janette," he said with a wide smile. He caught Natalie's gaze for a moment, an electricity running through them which Janette couldn't fail to notice. He looked back at his immortal companion. "Janette, Natalie and I are engaged."

Janette's eyes opened wide. "Engaged?"

"Yes. Show her, Nat," he said excitedly. Natalie complied, holding out the ring for Janette to examine.

Janette took her hand lightly, looking over the diamond. "Very nice. You always did have good taste, Nicolas," she said with a smile, the pun intentional. She looked up at Natalie. "Congratulations, my dear," she said, giving her a perfunctory kiss on the cheek.

"Thank you, Janette," she replied.

"This is some accomplishment," she told her. "Nicolas has tried before to live a mortal life. He's never gotten this close. That is a great credit to you, I'm sure."

Natalie ignored the use of the word close, but Nick did not.

"I'm not close, Janette. I'm there. Fully human.

"It does seem that way," she replied, regarding him carefully. "Do I take that to mean you've worked out all the...problems?"

It took Natalie a moment to catch what Janette was getting at, but at Nick's response it was clear.

He smiled an almost wicked smile, as he said, "All of them."

Janette's face took on an almost amused expression. She understood exactly. "Congratulations, Nicolas," she said, giving him a kiss, then couldn't help but add, "I'm **very** impressed."

Natalie breathed a sigh of relief as Janette excused herself to go to her other guests. "If I didn't know better, I'd think she was amused," Natalie commented.

"She is," Nick replied, without ill feeling. If anything, she'd left with that 'Poor Nicolas, I hope you know what you're doing' look that he knew so well. He turned to Natalie. "Come on. Let's get a drink, and then dance. We've got a lot to celebrate."

The bottle of champagne almost gone, Nick turned to the skimpily-dressed waitress to order another. Any apprehension about this night had dissipated in the optimistic air of celebration, the hypnotic beat of the music, and the free flow of alcohol. Most of The Raven's regulars, as well as friends Nick hadn't seen for decades, had stopped by the table to wish Nick a happy birthday, most surprised, if not shocked, as Nick would introduce, "...my fiancee, Natalie." Soon word had spread throughout the club that Nick had attained his long-desired humanity, and traffic to the table became more congested as his age-old former companions came to observe, some with comments of disdain, but most merely with an incredulous curiosity. Schanke of course was oblivious, Stonetree observant but strangely sedate, Natalie too tipsy by now to be anything but carefree, and Nick too elated to let anything bother him.

Janette had made her way back to the table, taking an empty seat beside Nick. Schanke offered her champagne, but she indicated that she had a drink already. "So, Nicolas, are you and your friends enjoying your party?" she asked pleasantly.

"Yes. Thank you," he said, putting his hand over hers affectionately.

"You've got a very nice place here, Janette," Stonetree broke in.

"Why thank you, Captain Stonetree. You must come more often," she replied, eliciting a slightly worried look from Nick and Natalie.

"Yeah, it's a great place all right, Captain," Schanke added, "but being a happily married man, I'd know better than to come here alone--"

Schanke turned pale as Alma came to the table, swearing that he could hear her snarl at him. She turned to Nick. "Just wanted to wish you good luck, Nick," she said, then glanced towards Natalie. "Hope you have a nice life," she said with the coldness that implied she doubted it would be his last.

Janette glared a warning at her as Nick put a reassuring hand on Natalie's thigh. Natalie just forced a smile as Alma walked away.

Janette turned to Natalie. "Natalie, would you mind if I borrowed your fiance for a dance?"

Nick turned to her as if asking permission. "Nat?"

"Sure, go ahead," she said. "Come on, Schank, why don't you and I get up for a while. At least you know you'll be safe with me."

Schanke gave her a sideways glance, wondering if she knew about Alma. "Knight, you didn't--"

"Come on, Janette," he said with a grin, purposely not allowing Schanke to finish. Of course he'd told Natalie. "Let's dance. I don't think we have in at least a hundred years or so." He bent to give Natalie a kiss. "Be easy on him, Nat. His heart can't take the excitement."

Janette moved dangerously close to him, bringing her lips to his ear. "So, Nicolas, you've finally done it. How does it feel to be human?"

He thought a moment, holding her body next to his as they moved to the music. "Warm, alive, exciting..."

"And you were able to...?"

From anyone else, he would have considered it an invasion of privacy. But it was Janette. He could see the amazement in her eyes, and he had been too close to her to hide the truth.

"Yes. Janette, I'd almost forgotten how wonderful it can be."

He could tell from her expression that she had not, not completely at least. "And you didn't have the urge to drink her blood?" she asked, totally intrigued.

He shook his head, looking into her eyes. "It's gone, Janette. It really is."

"Then our bond is too," she told him, her eyes full of regret.

"No," he told her, with the great affection he still felt for her in his eyes. "That will never go away. I promise."

She smiled, sadly. "Still sweet, after eight hundred years. Well, for your sake, Nick, I hope this is real, and that it is gone for good." She paused. "I always knew you wanted this, but I suppose I never thought it was possible. But you do look happy, Nicolas, for the first time in hundreds of years. It's good to see you at peace."

He smiled at her, appreciating the sentiment, and kissing her on the cheek. He kept his face close to hers. "What about you, Janette? Are you all right? Has there been any more trouble?"

"We almost forgot about him, didn't we? No, there's been nothing else. But we can't avoid it, can we?" She pulled way to look at him. "Try to enjoy your party, Nicolas. Remember, he has eternity before him. He's in no hurry." She gave him another kiss, this time on the lips, then tried to smile. "Happy Birthday."

Nick watched her go, then looked around the dance floor until he spotted Natalie, dancing with Schanke. He tried to contain his laughter as he made his way over to rescue her. "Hey, Don, mind if I cut in? I haven't danced with my lady all night."

"No, that's okay," Schanke said, out of breath. "Sorry, Nat, hate to leave you with a less experienced dancer..."

"He should only know how many more years dancing experience I have over him," Nick told her as he pulled her closer. "You know, come to think of it, this is the first time we've ever danced together..."

"I know," she said as she laced her hands around his neck, glad that the tempo had slowed a bit. "How was your dance with Janette?" she asked trying in vain to sound totally casual.

"I think she's really happy for us," he told her, as his hands made a sensuous movement along her waist. He looked into her eyes. "Nat, I'm sorry if tonight has been difficult. Some of them...aren't quite sure how to deal with humans...they can't understand what's going on between us."

"It's all right," she broke in, meaning it. "They're your friends. I don't expect you to give up that aspect of your life for me." Her eyes twinkled as she said, "Besides, you've got to have someone from your side at the wedding."

He smiled, then his brow wrinkled. "Nat, there's a problem with them coming to the wedding..."

She looked at him with a questioning gaze for a moment, and then as it hit her they both said in unison, "The church."

"Okay, well, they can come to the reception," he said with a grin. He kissed her, almost stopping the dance, then continued, just holding her against him as they rocked to the music.

"Nick," she said in his ear, in a voice that told him she was reluctant to being up the subject. "I know we haven't discussed it, but you do want to marry in a church, don't you? I know I'm not the most religious person, but my brother and I were raised Catholic, and--"

"So was I," he told her, ironic as it sounded. "Of course I do. Although producing a baptismal certificate for me might be a little difficult. I'll speak to Father Roquefort about it."

She looked at him, more at ease. "I didn't know how you felt about it."

"Nat, God has taken me back in," he said, with a renewed faith she hadn't realized yet was there. "Not to mention, given me you. I think I owe it to him to do things his way from now on." He kissed her, his mind filled with all the plans they would soon be making...

Stonetree's hand on his arm brought him back to the present. He turned to the Captain in sudden alarm, knowing something was wrong.

"I'm sorry to have to put a damper on your party, Nick, but the station just called. They just found another body, same M.O."

"Where?" he and Natalie almost asked at once.
Stonetree drew in a breath. "A block from here."

Nick tried to accustom himself to the feel of his own heart beating wildly as he led Natalie back to their table. Stonetree had already told Schanke, and Janette, sensing the smell of human fear, had been alerted at once.
"He may still be in the area," Nick said, reaching for his gun, and pulling it from its holster. "I want to go alone."
"Are you crazy?" Schanke asked him, grabbing his jacket.
"Captain?"
Stonetree gave him a nod, putting a hand on Schanke's arm. "Let him go."
"Nick!" Natalie's eyes were filled with anguish. She knew whom he expected to find.
He gave her a quick kiss. "It'll be all right, Nat. Just stay here, in the crowd. Whatever you do, don't leave. He looked up at Janette, a silent plea in his eyes. "Janette..."
She nodded her acknowledgement of his request, moving beside Natalie, a cool hand protectively on her shoulder. "Be careful, Nicolas."
He turned to Schanke, who was still too dumbfounded to speak. "Look after the ladies for me, okay Schank?"
And he was gone, as fast as was humanly possible.

And as he ran to the scene of the latest grisly crime, the fear that he had pointedly, if not naively, pushed aside for the last few hours came rushing back at him, in an overpowering assault of memories...
As he danced with María Eva, she caught his eye, and his heart stopped. He excused himself from his innocent young love, making his way to the ageless beauty whose seductive power had led him to the life he had been trying so hard to escape. Yet she still held a power over him...
"Happy Birthday, Nicolas!" she said attaching herself to him.
"What are you doing here, Janette?" he asked, though her cool cheek against his was tempering his annoyance.
"Nicolas, how could I miss your birthday?" she said into his ear, kissing him. He could feel his eyes beginning to burn, and he pulled away from her before he could be transformed. Damn her power over him!
"Janette, please. Not here, not now. I'm so close--"
"To what? Oh, your little plaything? Nicolas, truly you can't believe that that can lead to anything. If you wish to feed on her, go ahead, but please don't torture yourself with vain dreams of loving her..."
"Are you here alone?" he asked, pulling away from her.
He turned around as he felt a cold presence at his back.

LaCroix's eyes were glowing amber. "When you are joined to others in blood, you can never be alone, Nicholas..."

He looked at the body in horror, a young woman drained of her life force, victim of a psychotic monster. LaCroix was on a rampage now, he knew it, pursuing him as fervently now, as he had through the centuries. Stalking him, warning him, toying with him, drawing him out...

...of the Raven.

Natalie paced nervously before the bar. "I want to go to him," she insisted.

Janette shook her head. "Natalie, LaCroix isn't like Nick. He's a predator who would rip you to shreds without a second thought."

"And he may have Nick right now," she countered.

Janette's eyes clouded over with her own concern. "Then there would be nothing either of us could do anyway," she said quietly.

"You're quite right about that, Janette. I did teach you well."

The women looked up in horror at the being that had approached them apparently out of nowhere.

"LaCroix..." Janette whispered.

All the wild speculation, the fear and dread that had led to this moment erupted in the shocking revelation that indeed, somehow, he had survived. How was no longer important. For Janette had known him too long not to recognize the anger that had transformed his blue eyes into a burning amber-red, his fangs protruding ever so slightly as his evil smile taunted them, his eyes bathing them in a malevolent light.

"What do you want here?" Janette found the courage to demand.

"No hello? Janette, what's happened to your manners?"

"I can't have a scene here, LaCroix," she told him.

"Then let's go into your lower chambers for a drink, and a little chat..."

Janette moved to go, glancing at Natalie. But LaCroix would not make it so easy.

"I think Nicholas' pretty little mortal toy should join us."

"No, LaCroix, leave her here." She tried to appeal to his vampire sense. "I don't allow mortals in our private haven."

"Make an exception," he snarled.

Two of her vampire retainers had come up to LaCroix. One he pushed aside with little effort--the other backed away at his hiss as he realized who LaCroix was.

"Keep the humans away," Janette ordered them. "Especially the police. No one is to know what's going on."

They nodded, backing away from LaCroix, who had grabbed

Natalie's arm with a deathly cold hand, holding her in a painful grip. "Lead the way, Janette..."

Janette glanced at Natalie, her expression saying she was sorry. Natalie nodded, understanding. Janette was powerless against him.

They all were.

María Eva was gone. In a panic, he slipped out of the party, searching the royal palace desperately with his vampiric vision.

A heartbeat. Fear. He rushed to the source and found her there, terrified as LaCroix held her in his tight grasp.

"Nicolas!" she cried out as she saw him, then froze in terror as she watched her love transform into something hellish, something beastly...

Nick rushed into the Raven, finding Schanke and Stonetree waiting for him...alone.

"Natalie? Janette?" he asked, terror gripping him.

"I don't know where the hell they went," Schanke told him in disgust. "I wanted to check out the back room, but those two guys won't let anyone through."

"Nick, they'll let **you** through," Stonetree said with meaning.

"What do you mean? If they won't let Metro Police--" Schanke began to complain.

"I'm going in. Just stay away!" he called over his shoulder, too frantic to even wonder at Stonetree's strange demeanor.

Janette stood arms distance from LaCroix, watching carefully for any sudden move, feeling helpless to act. Her mind was racing, going through the possibilities of how to escape, or at least find a way to allow Natalie to do so. Yet at the same time, she knew that there was not a thought, not an emotion she could keep from her malevolent master. If only Nicolas would get here...and yet what could he do in his present state?

LaCroix's eyes had subdued to a lightly glowing amber, as he sated his thirst with a bottle of blood from Janette's "wine" rack, holding the bottle in his right hand, Natalie with his left. His arm was around her waist like a vise, and she had ceased to struggle, knowing it was futile.

Better the bottle than me, she thought grimly as she watched him drink hungrily.

"There's still time," he told her, reading her thoughts. "We must wait for Nicholas, after all. Otherwise, it spoils the fun."

"LaCroix, let her go," Janette implored him. "She's of no use to you--"

"Ah, but she is, Janette. Our Nicholas loves her. That makes her very valuable indeed."

"He's not **ours**, or yours anymore, LaCroix. Nicolas has made his decision. He's happy. Let him be!"

LaCroix eyes glowered at her. "Oh, Janette, how little you understand. Nicholas has no choice. And neither do you. I made you both, and you are mine for as long as I wish to possess you." He took another swig of blood, letting it drip from his lips. "Your love for him was always your downfall."

Nick stepped through the door, his blue eyes ablaze. "And your inability to leave us in peace was yours."

"Nicholas. You've decided to join us." He extended the bottle. "Care for a drink?"

"Let her go, LaCroix. It's me you want."

"Oh yes, Nicholas," he replied, his anger rising once more. "It is you I want. Did you think you could destroy me so easily? Did you think I would allow such betrayal from my child?"

"Then do what you want with me, but let Natalie go!"

LaCroix's face softened to a smirk of satisfaction. He was getting to Nick, and he knew it. "But, Nicholas, she intrigues me. After all, I hear that she's the one who helped you regain your mortality. What power is it that she wields over you? What was it that made you betray and abandon the gift that I gave you?"

Nick stood motionless, knowing he was powerless against LaCroix, hating himself for putting Natalie in danger like this. She had given him nothing but love and support, and he could only watch helplessly as LaCroix toyed with her.

"What was it, Nicholas?" he asked again, regarding Natalie for the first time, looking her over carefully.

"Was it her beauty?" His left hand around her waist pulled her closer to him, while his free hand went to her face, his cold sensuous caress moving from her cheek along the line of her bare neck, resting there for a dangerous moment before moving down to her breast. He fondled her as his lips brushed against her bare shoulder, hesitating at her neck as he watched for Nick's response.

Nick seethed, unmoving, knowing that any sudden provocation would mean Natalie's life.

"Was it her mind, Nicholas?" His hand touched her temple, then reached for her hair, pulling it down, running his fingers through it. Natalie began to shake, fighting to contain her fear.

"Or was it her oh-so willing body? Is that what tempted you, Nicholas? Mortal love?" And as he taunted Nick, his hands moved slowly down Natalie's body, coming to rest on her pelvis, continuing to caress. "Why, Nicholas, she's trembling. Did she tremble thus when you took her?

Nick couldn't even feel Janette's supporting hand on his arm. His eyes were transfixed, burning with rage as LaCroix carried out his defilement.He wanted to scream, rush out , tear Natalie from him and rip LaCroix apart with his bare hands...but the part of him that was still rational

knew he could not. Fear of his own death didn't impede him. But the fear of what LaCroix would do to Natalie after killing him, kept him motionless, watching, enduring, burning with the desire to kill.

"Tell me the truth, Nicholas. Was it really as fulfilling as you thought it would be?" His hand moved back to her neck, his fingers finding a delectable spot. "Or did you really long to consummate your passion with blood?" He extended a claw-like nail."Come, Nicholas. Do it the right way. Drink her blood."

And with his nail, he slashed the surface of Natalie's neck, a long thin line soon oozing blood. He smiled cruelly as Natalie cried out in pain, contemplating the blood like the delicacy it was for him.

All reason was gone. The sight of Natalie, helpless, violated, pain and fear in her eyes, tore at him like a stake through his heart, ripping away at the thin layer of self-control he had struggled to maintain. Nick's body began to shake as the repressed rage erupted inside him.

Self-awareness was gone. All that mattered was Natalie. He did not know that his eyes had begun to burn blood-red, his fangs protruding as he hissed, "Get your hands off her, LaCroix, or I'll kill you!"

Suddenly he realized that Natalie's eyes had opened wide in shock as she cried, "Oh, my God! Nick!"

LaCroix was smiling, victory painted on his face. "So, Nicholas, not as human as you thought..."

And Nick could taste the blood on his lips where he'd bitten down with his own fangs. The despair that began to overtake him was quickly replaced with the realization that now he could act...

LaCroix scrutinized Natalie for a reaction as he said, "Is this the man you love? This beast?"

He tightened his grip on María Eva..."Is this the man you love? This beast?"

Her eyes widened in horror. "No! Madre de Dios! No!" she cried.

LaCroix smiled with satisfaction. "There you are, Nicholas. She renounces her love for you. I don't think she's worthy." His fangs shot out. "For anything more than an evening meal!"

Nick watched in horror as LaCroix drained her of life...

"Is this the man you love, Natalie?" he challenged again.

"Yes!" she cried.

LaCroix's face registered his surprise. "Then Nicholas was right. You are a remarkable woman." His fangs shot out. "Perhaps you are worthy of being one of us!" His mouth moved towards her neck...

And Nick was on him, taking him by surprise, knocking him to the floor as Natalie was thrown from his grasp.

"Janette! Take Natalie and get out of here!" he shouted as LaCroix picked himself up, lunging at Nick with his full force.

Janette ran to Natalie, helping her up. "Get away!" she commanded.

"No," Natalie refused.

Janette nodded, her own desire to stay just as steadfast. She put herself in front of Natalie to protect her as LaCroix made his lunge.

At first, Nick leaped into the air, avoiding the fatal blow that LaCroix swung at him. But with his regained power came the realization of his own weakness. And as LaCroix struck again with his powerful hand, Nick was thrown against the wall.

He could see the women still there, watching, and as he struggled to lift himself up he cried, "Get out of here!" But LaCroix's anger was to be vented on him alone. With one hand, LaCroix grabbed him by the shirt collar, lifting him into the air. As he struggled to escape, he realized that his right arm was broken. The pain surging through him was a reminder that his retransformation was nowhere near complete.

"Did you really think you had a chance, Nicholas?" LaCroix growled as he tossed him against the wall.

Nick could feel the blood flowing from his forehead, into his eyes, blurring his vision. His entire body ached, and he knew that this last fall had broken his ribs. But his only thought was of Natalie, and Janette, and how he had failed them both. Why wouldn't they escape?!

Consciousness was beginning to slip away. He could feel LaCroix lifting him up once more, holding him as he said, "You're weak, Nicholas. Beg me for blood, and I'll give it to you. Beg for my forgiveness...Beg for my blood..."

"No..." he managed.

LaCroix's fangs extended, his eyes flaming with anger. "Then I'll take yours!"

"No!" Janette's voice rang out as she propelled herself across the room, onto LaCroix's back, pulling his head away from Nick's neck. But it had been a useless effort, and Janette knew it. With one hand, he tossed her aside unperturbed.

And as LaCroix's fangs penetrated his neck, Nick could feel the excruciating pain course throughout his entire body, as slowly his life force was sucked from him. His only thought was that this was divine pay-back for all those he had similarly destroyed. But why now? Why would Natalie have to lose her life for his own evil...?

He was barely conscious as LaCroix tossed him to the floor, his anger and thirst sated. "What's the matter, Nicholas?" he could hear LaCroix say in an almost dream-like state. "Feeling a little drained?"

And he knew at that moment what it was LaCroix wanted. Not to kill him, no. But to bring him so close to death that he would beg to be embraced once more. **Never...**

And then he could feel a warm hand take his. He could feel the blood being wiped from his eyes, and as his vision cleared she was there. "Natalie..." he whispered. "Are you all right?"

"I'm okay," she managed, holding his hand against her cheek.

"You have to get out of here--"

"I'm not going anywhere without you," she told him, caressing his cheek. "We have to get you to a hospital."

The pain on his face was clear as he said, "I think we both know it's too late for that. It's over, Nat..."

"No," she murmured, her eyes brimming with tears. She was a doctor, and she knew damn well he was right. But she wouldn't accept it. "I won't let you leave me, Nick."

"This is what I wanted, isn't it?" He closed his eyes for a moment, the pain making each word an effort. "To be...mortal."

"No, Nick," Natalie pleaded, her tears flowing freely now. She gripped his hand tightly as she said, "This isn't what you wanted. Not to die without really living first."

His face was calm with resignation as he replied, "Maybe God thinks I've lived enough."

"It wasn't God who did this to you," she told him bitterly.

"No, Nicolas," Janette affirmed as she knelt beside him, her fingers resting lightly on his arm. She looked up to glare at LaCroix, who was observing the scene with an expression of satisfaction, and perhaps a bit of morbid curiosity.

Natalie looked at Janette, her eyes pleading as she asked, "Janette, isn't there anything you can do to help him?"

Janette's eyes met hers, registering her surprise at first, then her understanding. Natalie was a doctor, a human doctor. She knew that no mortal could save Nick at this point. But she loved him too much to watch him die so needlessly. Janette understood this all too well, and in their love for Nick knew that they had a kinship. Natalie was asking her help; and Nicolas needed it. That was enough for her. "He won't heal by himself," she explained to Natalie. "He's too close to being human. I can give him my blood--but it will bring him completely over again."

"Do it," Natalie said without hesitation.

"No," Nick broke in. "Natalie, Janette, no. That's what he wants."

"You know me so well, Nicholas," LaCroix said, coming to stand ominously above Nick's prone form. "Despite your betrayal, I don't want to kill you. Oh, no. Seeing you beg to be embraced by us once more would be a much sweeter revenge."

"Never," Nick told him, wincing in pain. "I'd rather die."

"Have it your way." LaCroix shrugged his shoulders, stepping back to observe in silence.

"Don't be stubborn, Nicolas," Janette told him. "This isn't about LaCroix. What good will it do to let him destroy you like this?"

"At least this time he won't destroy my soul," he replied.

Janette was shaking her head, a single blood tear making its way down her cheek. Her tone softened, her face full of more distress and weakness that Natalie had ever imagined she could possess. "Nicolas, please..."

He shook his head lightly, his eyes resting on Natalie, begging for her understanding. "I can't let him win, Nat. You know that."

But Natalie's voice was filled with desperate anger as she said, "No, Nick. If you live, LaCroix doesn't win. **We** do. You and I. Because you'll be alive, and we'll be together."

His resolve was fading with each fleeting moment of life. After all, he did want to live, to be with her. A tear, a salt water human tear, made its way down his cheek as he said softly, "Nat, if I drink vampire blood, everything between us will be lost. I don't think I could bear that now..."

She shook her head, bringing it closer to his. "No. Not our feelings. Not our love. And the rest--we'll have again. In time." Tears were streaming down her face now as she begged, "Please, Nick. Please--give us that time..."

Nick looked into her eyes, seeing all that they had shared, all the dreams come true, and all the dreams left yet unfulfilled. And as he felt his own life slipping away, he knew that at this moment, more than anything, he wanted to stay with her. "Okay," he said weakly, then nodded to Janette.

Natalie closed her eyes for an instant in relief, then glanced at Janette, who seemed equally relieved. Then, as Janette extended her fangs, Nick looked to Natalie and whispered, "Nat, please, before we do this...kiss me."

It was a request she wouldn't fully understand until later, but she gladly complied, covering his mouth with hers, warming the lips that had already begun to grow cold. And Nick responded with the last of his strength, relishing in her touch, her love. When she had separated from him, she realized that she'd left a slight smile on his lips. He held her hand as he turned to Janette.

Janette's eyes had reached a warm yellow glow, and Natalie tried not to flinch as she watched her bring her wrist up to her lips, ripping it open with her teeth...

And as the blood began to flow freely, Janette offered her wrist to Nick, supporting him as he raised his head to accept her gift of life...

And with each drop of her life force that he took into his body, he could feel his strength returning, along with a desire, a hunger...

Natalie drew in a breath as Nick opened his eyes,

glowing now a bright amber, his face contorting in an insatiable lust for blood. He was sitting up now, bending over Janette's wrist, grasping it in his hand as he hungrily drank from her. Janette's lips had parted in a gasp of painful pleasure as he drew in her strength, her power, her life...and with her free hand she ran her fingers through his hair, guiding him, soothing him, holding him to her, reveling in the centuries-old passion that was still as fresh and arousing as it had been almost eight hundred years ago..

"Bois, mon amour!" she whispered in ecstasy. "Bois!"

Only when she had begun to feel weak did she gently pull her wrist from him. He grabbed her hand, holding it for a moment as he said softly, "J'ai soif..."

"Je sais, mon amour," she said tenderly, cradling his head in her lap. "But it's time to rest." Carefully, she laid him back down on the floor. His eyes had already closed as the healing process had begun. Janette reached to wipe the blood from his lips, watching him for a moment, her eyes reflecting a myriad of emotions, not the least of which was her love for him. She looked at Natalie, and said, "It's done."

Natalie had been watching, wanting but unable to tear her eyes away, her own inner turmoil raging. Nick was alive. That was all that mattered. Yet what she had witnessed had only served to remind her of the bond between Nick and Janette that had never really gone away. No matter how Nick tried to reassure her, would it ever? But she hated herself for even thinking of that all now. Nick was alive. Nick was alive! And she smiled as she looked down to see his hand, still in hers. He had kept it there throughout.

She reached to his cheek, so cool now, but devoid of the scars from his fall, already healed.

Nick was alive! That was all that mattered.

Neither Janette nor Natalie had seen LaCroix silently disappear, but as Janette's retainers ran down the stairs to see what had happened, they knew that the crisis was, at least temporarily, over. Janette instructed them to carry Nick to the couch in the upstairs room, then stood, or rather tried to stand, for the first time. Dizziness overtook her, and she grabbed onto the wall for support.

"Are you all right?" Natalie asked, going to her side.

Janette nodded weakly. "I just need to drink... That took...a lot out of me." And as Natalie pulled a bottle from the rack and handed it to her, Janette grabbed it from her, drinking hungrily until the bottle was almost empty. Her thirst somewhat sated, she took a breath, wiping the blood from her lips. She nodded at Natalie. "Thank you."

"Thank **you**." Natalie said gratefully. "Can we take him home now?"

"Oh, no," Janette told her. "He needs to rest. And when he awakens, he will be thirsty. Perhaps out of control."

"I can handle him," Natalie responded.

Janette raised her eyebrows. "You may not be able to." She took another gulp from the bottle, finishing it, then looked at Natalie, whose face was filled with a mixture of hurt, anger, concern...**It must be Nicolas' influence, but I'm actually beginning to concern myself with their feelings...** "All right," she relented. "Why don't you stay here with him, and as soon as I'm sure he's under control, you can take him back to your apartment."

"Thank you," Natalie said.

Nicolas, how do you get me involved with these humans?!

The figure had come dashing from the inside room, and Schanke had grabbed his gun, hot in pursuit as the blond man in black had raced from The Raven. Stonetree had reached the door in time to see Schanke watching, stupefied, as his prey lifted up into the air a hundred feet...and **flew** away.

Now, fifteen minutes later, Schanke was still rambling on about the possibilities as Stonetree sat silently, pensively. They were officially off duty now. But neither would leave until they knew what had happened to Knight and Natalie.

"He flew. I saw it. Didn't you, Captain? Come on--"

"I don't know," Stonetree replied. "I'm not sure what I saw."

"Nick's been in there a half hour now. I don't know why we don't just--" He stopped mid-sentence as he glanced at the curtain to the inner room. "Look, the bouncers are gone. I'm going in--"

Stonetree called after him, but realized that Schanke was playing a hunch just as Stonetree was playing his own. He followed him through the door to see the two men carrying Nick's unconscious form up a staircase.

"What the hell happened to him?" Schanke asked in alarm.

"I told you to stay out," one of Janette's retainers called to Schanke as they placed Nick's body on the couch.

"This is one of my men, here," Stonetree said, indicating Nick. "We just came to check on him--"

One of the men came to face them. Suddenly his face contorted, his eyes burning amber, grotesque fangs protruding. "I said get out!" he told them in no uncertain terms.

"Steven!"

Janette had run up the stairs, and stood now between the two men and her retainers. Steven had stepped into line at the sound of her voice, and Schanke was looking from Steven to Janette in confusion, as if wondering if his eyes were playing tricks on him. "There's something crazy going on here--first, a guy runs out of here and **flies** away..."

"Detective Schanke, we've all been through a terrible ordeal. Nerves are making us all a little jumpy..." Stonetree could see that Janette was making her best attempt

to explain away whatever was going on, but she seemed unusually drained.

"The gunman was on crack," Natalie put in as she came up the stairs. "He was so hyped up he must have looked like he was running sixty miles an hour."

"I don't know," Schanke mumbled, beginning to doubt his own memory. After all, he had been drinking all night...

It wasn't until Natalie stepped up to them that the men realized the shape she was in. Her hair had been pulled down, dried blood drew attention to a gash on her forehead, and bruises were starting to turn purple on her arms.

"Natalie, what the hell happened to you?" Stonetree asked.

"And what happened to Nick?" Schanke added, pointing to his partner's sleeping form.

"The gunman was holding us hostage," Janette explained. "Nick overpowered him, but was hurt. The gunman fled while we were tending to Nick's injuries."

"Let's get him to a hospital," Schanke began, but Natalie came to Janette's assistance.

"I already checked him out, Schank. He'll be fine. He's just got a concussion. But he shouldn't be moved. He needs rest." At Schanke's protest, she added, "I'm gonna stay with him."

"Come on, Schanke," Stonetree said. He turned to the women. "As long as everyone's all right, we might as well be heading home. Natalie, take some time off and take care of him...and yourself. Just have him call me when he feels up to making a statement, and I'll send a uniform over."

Natalie agreed, and the two men where gone. "Schanke may be a problem," Janette told her. "If I had had the strength, I would have made them both forget. Oh well, I suppose we can always take care of it later." She turned to Steven. "Bring two bottles upstairs. He'll need them when he wakes up."

Steven and his companion left, and she looked at Natalie. "I need to get some rest. The sun will be coming up soon. He probably won't awaken until nightfall. If you want, I can find you a place to sleep."

"I'll stay here with him," Natalie replied, sitting down beside Nick's sleeping form.

"Have it your way," Janette responded, shrugging, too tired to argue. "Just be careful if he awakens before I get back." She took the bottles from Steven, who had just returned, and handed them to her. "You'll need these if he does."

LaCroix stood before him again, an evil smile on his lips as he held Natalie in his grasp. Once more he began to touch her, fondle her, nuzzle at her neck as a lust for her blood began to burn in his eyes. Nick was paralyzed, helpless, struggling to voice his silent scream.

...And suddenly Janette was there, her touch setting

him free, her arms embracing him, her lips seeking out his. He kissed her desperately as he tried to lose himself in his desire for her. His eyes closed, he moved his lips slowly from hers, tasting her cool skin, finding his way to her neck. And when his eyes opened, they were glowing bright yellow as his fangs extended to pierce her smooth white skin...

And over her shoulder he saw them. LaCroix and Natalie locked in a passionate embrace. He was holding her now more like a lover than a victim, kissing her with an almost human desire. And Natalie...seemed to be responding! Nick's jealous fury began to rise as LaCroix slowly began to undress her...

"Come to me, my love," Janette whispered, trying to keep him from watching the others. "Bois, mon amour..."

"No..." he cried, pulling away from her.

And when he turned back to Natalie and LaCroix, it was too late. Natalie lay on the floor, bloodied, violated...dead. He rushed to her, gathering her still form into his arms...as LaCroix stood over him, her blood fresh on his lips.

"You were right, Nicholas. She was extraordinary...in every way..."

"Noooooooooooooo...."

Nick's eyes fluttered open and he struggled to focus, confused, disoriented, not knowing where he was. Had it been a dream? How much of it had been in his mind, how much real? And Natalie...where was Natalie?!

"Natalie..." He sighed in relief as his vision cleared, and she was there, smiling at him, wiping the sweat from his brow. He reached up to her, taking her face in his hands. "Nat, thank God you're all right. I thought--I was afraid--"

"It's okay," she told him as he brought himself up to kiss her. Tears of relief were flowing down her cheeks. "Everything's going to be okay."

And Nick smiled at her broadly, his love for her and joy at seeing her alive outweighing all else. He drew her into his arms, hugging her tightly, then finding her lips, relishing her warmth, her taste...

"I thought I was going to lose you," she breathed into his ear. "Nick, I don't know what I'd do without you..."

"Neither do I, my love," he whispered, burying his face in her hair, the bare skin of her neck...

And suddenly something was very wrong. The desire to make love to her had begun to change into something else, something dreaded and familiar. His eyes began to burn, and as his lips tasted her neck, he felt his own sharp fangs beginning to protrude. He moved away slightly, still entranced by the softness of her skin, drawn in...by the smell of her blood.

"No," he whispered in fear, pulling away from her. And by the pained expression on her face, he knew it was true.

It had not all been a dream. And suddenly it came back to him. Imminent death...her pleading words...Janette's blood flowing into him, giving him life. Life?!

"Nick, please..." she said, reaching out to him.

"No," he growled in despair. "Nat, get away. I don't want...to hurt you..."

"You won't hurt me," she told him. "You can control it..."

"I did control it," he told her bitterly. "And what did it accomplish? Nearly getting you killed? Ending up like this again?!" He closed his eyes, breathing heavily as if he were finding his own instincts too powerful to handle. "Natalie, please...go away...I'm thirsty...I need blood...I don't want to--"

Without flinching, she pulled the bottle from the floor where she had left it, offering it to him. He looked at her for a moment, knowing how difficult this was for her, then grabbed the bottle from her, unable to contain his urge. He uncorked it with his teeth, then drank...and drank...

Natalie watched him in silence. His eyes were ablaze, his thirst unassuaged, his desire overpowering, as he treated the rich red liquid as a delicacy he had long hungered for. When the bottle was finished, he closed his eyes, licking his lips, breathing deeply...then, as he studied the empty vessel, a sudden sadness overcame him, and he threw the bottle violently against the wall.

"Nick, please!" she begged. "It's going to take a while, I know, but in time things will be like they were..."

"Like they were?! Nat, don't you see, I was never cured, never! It was just lying dormant, waiting for something to trigger it. It wasn't real--"

He stopped mid-sentence. He knew how cruel he was being to her. But his despair was overwhelming, and his anger at himself, for having accepted Janette's gift of immortality, was obscuring any happiness he had felt only moments ago.

"How dare you!" she fumed, her eyes red with tears. "How dare you say it wasn't real, as if what happened between us means nothing to you."

"Nat..."

"So what if it wasn't completely gone? It may never be completely gone. But you had it under control, and you were **living. We were living.** Doesn't that count for anything?!"

The pain in her eyes was too much for him. How much was he going to hurt her? "Nat, I'm sorry." He pulled her into his arms, letting her rest against his chest, hugging her to him. And as his love and concern for her took over, he could feel his features returning to normal. He looked down at her with anguished blue eyes as he whispered, "Of course it was real. The only real thing I have to hold onto...to work towards again. Nat, I love you. I'm just so angry at myself..."

"You shouldn't be. The will to live is a very **human** quality.You want to be mortal to **live**, Nick, not to die needlessly. It wouldn't have been God's decision if you had

died--it would have been LaCroix's. Besides," she told him, trying to smile through her tears, "You made a promise to me." She lifted up her ring to remind him. "I'm not about to let you off so easily."

He took her hand, kissing it, then held it against his cheek, letting her warm him. "I love you," he told her again. "No matter what's happened, that hasn't changed." He kissed her on the forehead, holding her possessively. "Everything will be all right," he promised. But it was a promise he wasn't sure would be in his control to keep.

When he awoke again, Janette was sitting beside him with a mixture of apprehension and concern.

"Janette." He sat up to face her, his smile putting her at ease. "Je te dois ma vie, autrefois." **I owe you my life, again.**

She reached out to him, kissing him on the lips, then accepting his embrace. "I thought you might be angry."

"Not with you," he told her, kissing her again before separating from her. "With myself. For being too weak. After a century of trying to become mortal--I didn't want to die."

"There's nothing wrong with wanting to live, Nicolas," she told him. "Humans have the strongest will to live of all. When you have lived a full life as one of them, you'll willingly die in peace."

His face betrayed his doubt. "Did my blood tell you that?" he asked. "Because I'm not so sure."

"Listen to me, mon amour. You didn't take my blood because you wanted to be immortal. You did it for Natalie, and because you couldn't bear to lose what you have with her." She touched her fingers lightly to his cheek and smiled. "**That** is what I felt when we were joined."

He put his hand up to caress her fingers, and she could see relief in his calm blue eyes. In his heart he knew why he had given up his mortality this time. But it was reassuring to hear her reaffirm it.

"She is very fortunate," she said, not without a tinge of envy.

"No," he replied, looking into her eyes. "I'm the one who's fortunate. To have her...and you. A friendship like ours is rare amongst our kind."

"It's not our way to trust," she acknowledged willingly. "But I suppose you and I have just shared too much to feel otherwise."

There was a twinkle in his eye as he said, "Maintenant je t'appartiens." **Now I belong to you.**

She shook her head, her expression betraying her regret. "Non, mon amour. Tu es libre." **You are free.**

And suddenly Nick was overwhelmed with a warm rush of feeling for her. The woman who had led him down his cursed path had become his friend, his ally, and now, his liberator. For despite the centuries of seduction, of wanting to keep him just for herself, she had saved him

precisely so that he could be with another. She had always known what he desired, but had made his desires subordinate to her own. She'd wanted to control him, but now, given the power to do so, she was setting him free to choose and pursue his own way. He brought his lips to hers in a show of his affection, his gratitude...

And before he had realized what he was doing, his lips had brushed across her cheek, down the smooth line of her neck, tasting the cool soft flesh. He nuzzled against her, entranced by her scent, her touch, then lifted his head up as his fangs extended, ready to take her...

"Nicolas, no," she said softly, but forcefully.

His eyes opened to look at her in confusion, glowing lightly amber as he said, "J'ai soif...J'ai besoin de sang..."

"Not like this, Nicolas," she whispered, controlling her own desire as she pulled away from him. She picked up the remaining bottle that lay beside the bed, handing it to him. "Tu as besoin de sang. Tu es faible." **You do need blood. You're weak.**

He drank hungrily from the bottle, and when he looked at her again it was with a head that had cleared, and eyes filled with shame. "Janette, I'm sorry..."

"So am I, Nicolas," she said with a wistful smile. "But I don't think your fiancee would have understood."

He heaved a deep breath, grateful that she had once again not taken advantage of the power that could so easily be hers in his weakened state. "Thank you," he said, squeezing her hand as she stood.

"I think I'd better send you home with a fairly large supply," she said as she headed for the stairs. "The next few days could be very difficult, especially if you're close to Natalie."

"Where is Natalie?" he asked, beginning to worry, now that his senses had returned.

Janette smiled mischievously. "She went out to get something to eat. Strange, but nothing I had here appealed to her..."

When Natalie returned to The Raven, Nick was waiting for her with his coat on, and a large bag in his hand. She smiled to see him up and around, gladly accepting his kiss as he put his arm around her.

She peeked into his package. "Six-pack to go, huh?"

"I'll need this for a while," he explained, not sure if her joking manner was covering a real concern. "To get back my strength--"

She silenced his apprehension with a kiss. "Don't worry. I'll eat the food in the fridge so it doesn't spoil."

He smiled, more at ease, as Janette came up to them.

"Make sure he's always had his fill," Janette instructed her. "Don't let him try too soon to get off it. He'll need it to regain his control."

"I understand," Natalie told her, nodding. "Janette, thank you...for everything."

Janette nodded to her, then accepted Nick's light kiss on the cheek.

"Thank you, Janette. I owe you."

"No, Nicolas. After eight hundred years...I'd say maybe the score is finally even."

Nick had been reticent on the ride home, and Natalie was at a loss as to how to animate him. There were still so many things left unsaid and neither of them knew exactly how to begin. He kissed her lightly on the cheek as she took the package from him, then plopped on the couch to stare at the night sky.

The night. Again. And only the night.

"Nick, are you, uh, thirsty?" she called from the kitchen area.

He wasn't, actually, but he decided he'd follow Janette's suggestion and have his fill. He didn't want to take a chance of losing control if he got close to Natalie.

Close to Natalie. When would he ever be able to get close to her again? Just thinking of her ignited the urges inside him. Why was he finding it so difficult to suppress the beast within?

"I thought you'd be more comfortable in your own place," she said, mostly to make conversation as she uncorked the bottle. "But if you'd rather go to mine--"

"No," he said quickly as she brought the glass over, handing it to him. "Nat, it would remind me too much of what happened there. I can't let myself think about that now. It hurts too much."

She nodded her understanding as she sat beside him. It had actually played a part in her decision as well. Knowing what they had had, and could not have again for possibly a very long time... "Nick, would you feel more comfortable if I didn't stay?" she asked, hoping he wouldn't say yes.

How to tell her that just being with her without being able to touch her was tearing him apart inside--but he'd rather deal with that than be without her. "No. Please, Nat, if you don't mind, I want you to stay with me."

"Of course I don't mind," she said, her own tension easing. "I want to stay."

Her nodded his thanks to her, looking at her for a moment before turning his attention back to the glass. He contemplated it for what seemed like a long while before finally taking a sip...then finished it almost at once, drinking with a greater hunger than he'd realized was there. But suddenly guilt overwhelmed him. He laid the empty glass on the table, and without looking at her, said, "I'm sorry, Nat. I hate myself enough for having to drink it. But in front of you--"

"It's okay," she said quickly, touching his arm

lightly. "You have to.You need to recover completely and let your body adjust before you get off the blood again. Janette said so, and as your doctor, I would agree."

He looked at her, a pained expression on his face. "And as my fiancee?"

"I want what's best for you."

He touched her cheek tenderly. "You always have. I only wish I had been just as selfless. If I had had your best interests at heart, I would have never put you in danger by getting involved with you."

"Nick, stop it," she begged him. "Don't blame yourself for what happened."

But his feelings of culpability, of self-hatred, were too strong. "Nat, I'm so sorry you had to go through all that. I should have been more careful, protected you better. I should have known he was alive, and stayed at your side every minute. I guess I was just so caught up in--"

"In what? Being happy?" she broke in. "That's not a crime, Nick. We both wanted to forget the danger, enjoy what was happening between us."

"But I almost lost you," he said in a hoarse whisper, the reality of it assaulting him with fear.

"And I almost lost you," she said softly, her eyes becoming red as he pulled her into his arms, holding her against his chest.

"Natalie, when he started...touching you," he began. The pain in his voice made it clear that he couldn't bear to remember it, much less speak of it. "I wanted to tear him apart. But I was afraid that if I made a move...he'd kill you."

"He would have," she told him. "There was absolutely nothing you could have done. He was doing it to get to you, and I was praying you wouldn't let him. He would have destroyed you."

"I felt so helpless," he said, looking down into her eyes. "I should have protected you. How can you ever forgive me?"

"Nick, when you realized you had your powers, you attacked him to save my life, knowing damn well he would try to kill you. You risked your life for mine. What more could I possibly want or expect from you?"

He ran his hand through her hair. "Natalie, I would gladly give my life for yours."

"I know," she said, her large blue eyes serious. "And so would I. Let's just hope neither of us is ever faced with that decision again."

He nodded, some of the tension leaving his face as he reached down to kiss her. He released her before his desire could build. She could read something else in his eyes.

"What is it?" she prodded.

He closed his eyes, breathing deeply, before he said, "Nat, you were there when Janette brought me over again. I know it's a very...intense exchange. I'm sorry if seeing that caused you pain."

She hesitated, not sure how to answer. Of course it had hurt her, angered her, filling her with a jealousy she'd never imagined herself capable of. Yet those very feelings had consumed her with guilt as well. For she had known it was the only way to save his life. "I won't say it didn't hurt, Nick. How could it not to see you so...intimate with her?" She took his hand in hers. "But I asked you to do it. So that you could live and be with me. I'm just as responsible." She squeezed his hand, and smiled. "And I'll never regret it," she whispered.

His relief that she understood was a weight off his shoulders. He had caused her too much pain. "You know, Nat, Janette told me that when I was drinking her blood, she could feel my emotions..." He paused, wanting to stress, "...my love for you. She said that she could feel that I wasn't afraid to die...I just didn't want to leave you."

"I knew that," she assured him. She reached over to kiss him, wishing that she could warm the lips that had become so cold. For a few moments, he responded, almost letting down his wall of self-restraint. But then he pulled away from her.

"Nat, when I asked you to kiss me...it was because I knew it would be the last time in long while we could without--"

"I know," she said, sparing him from articulating something so difficult. She could see the frustration on his face, the desire to hold her as great as hers to be with him. "It's going to be hard, Nick. It always has been. But you did it before, and you can do it again..."

"It's just so difficult to be close to you, without..."

"I know."

He looked at her for a long moment, as if wanting to say something but unable to. She had been through so much because of their love...did he have the right to ask any more of her? "Nat, I know after all that's happened, I may not have the right to ask--" He paused awkwardly. "The things we planned may not come as quickly as we'd hoped, but...Natalie, would you still wear my ring? So we both know this is just a temporary obstacle, and that we haven't lost everything?"

She smiled broadly. "Nick, I'm not going anywhere," she told him tenderly. "And as far as this--" she held out her ring. "--you'd need a crowbar to take it off my finger!"

He almost laughed, relief washing over him completely this time. It would all be all right. He hugged her to him, kissing her lightly on the lips, stretching it just one more second longer...

She stood. "I don't know about you, but I need some sleep. I've been up for two days, and as soon as it gets light, I need to go check on Sidney."

"I'll be up in a few minutes," he said.

She was about to head up the stairs, then turned back to him. "Uh, Nick, I just realized I don't have a clean nightshirt here."

Had it been twenty-four hours earlier, he would have told her with a grin that it didn't matter. "You can take one of my pajama tops," he forced himself to say instead. "They're in the top drawer." There. Temptation averted.

But later, as he stood over the bed watching her, he realized that he'd find her hard to resist no matter what she wore. His black satin pajama top fell loosely over the curves of her body, while her long curls spilled onto the red satin pillow, framing the pure white face that beckoned his kiss. He changed into pajamas, then carefully slipped in next to her.

In her sleep, she instinctively molded herself against him. He put an arm boldly around her as the scent of her hair, her skin, filled his nostrils. He closed his eyes, held his breath and waited.

It was okay. The first step had been taken. He relaxed, enjoying the sensation of having her in his arms as he fell into a fitful sleep.

The next night, Janette came by to bring him an extra supply of blood, assuring him, though not without a look of disgust, that it was cow. She sat now at the edge of the bed, looking him over for signs of improvement. "You look much better, Nicolas. How do you feel?"

"Okay," he said with a smile. "Just a little weak. But I'm learning to control it."

"Just don't rush it," she warned him.

"What about you?" he asked. "Are you recovered?"

She nodded. "I'm even getting over the feeling that LaCroix might show up at any moment."

"Have you heard anything?" he asked as Natalie came to stand beside him.

"Good news," she said, satisfaction in her eyes. "The Elders were not very happy with his behavior. He's broken the Code and nearly exposed us all. So, as a punishment, he has been banned from this continent for the next century."

Nick's face flooded with relief, as he glanced up at Natalie, and took her hand, squeezing it. He looked back to Janette. "Then it's over."

"For **you**," she told him, the apprehension still crossing her eyes. "Some of us will still have to deal with him in a hundred years or so."

Nick's expression became sober as he realized that he would not be there to help her. Janette could sense his thoughts and her face softened. "Don't worry, Nicolas. I have a long time to prepare. I will be ready."

Natalie, still shaken from her experience with LaCroix, looked from Nick to Janette as she asked, "Will he really obey these Elders? He didn't seem to be afraid of anyone."

"He's not," Janette told her with a shudder. "But even LaCroix must answer to someone. In any case, we all have a more pressing problem." She looked at Nick. "Your partner,

and the Captain. They saw LaCroix fly, among other things. I would have made them forget, but I was too weak at the time."

"I'll take care of them," Nick assured her.

The sound of the elevator door opening downstairs drew their attention.

"Hey, Knight?"

"You may just get your chance," Natalie told them, then called, "We're up here, Schank!"

"Natalie, quick, hide these." He handed her the empty bottles of blood, and she threw them into the closet just as Schanke made his entrance, Stonetree behind him.

Schanke's face registered surprise as he quickly scanned the bedroom he'd never seen before. "Satin sheets, huh? Ooh la la."

"Nat picked them out," he lied, catching her dirty look out of the corner of his eye.

"How're ya doin', partner?" Schanke asked, real concern in his voice.

"Okay," he replied, taking Natalie's hand again. "I've got the best doctor in town looking after me."

Schanke raised his brow as he joked, "Just remember, her specialty is dead people."

"Oh, I know," he responded knowingly.

"You look a hell of a lot better than you did two nights ago, Nick," Stonetree said warmly as he came up beside Schanke. "And how are you ladies?"

"Just glad we're all in one piece," Natalie said, as she sat beside Nick on the bed.

"It's not something I'd want to have to go through again in this century," Janette mumbled under her breath.

"It was the damndest thing, Nick," Schanke began, shaking his head. "I swear that guy was flying. And then the bouncer--"

"Come on, Schank," Nick dismissed him. "How many beers did you have before you started seeing things?"

"At least eight," Natalie put in. "On top of the three bottles of champagne we polished off."

"I serious, guys--"

"Detective Schanke," Janette said, putting on her most seductive posture. "I'm very interested in hearing exactly what you saw." She walked over to him, a gloved hand going to his shoulder as her closeness began to make him perspire. He was already loosening his tie nervously as she said, "Why don't we let Nicolas rest, and you can tell me all about it?"

Nick wasn't sure if Janette had placed a suggestion in his mind, or simply appealed to his greatest weakness, but a moment later she was winking at them as she led Schanke downstairs.

Stonetree, unperturbed, had approached Nick, sitting on the very edge of the bed as if some dark secret were about to be imparted. Natalie could see Nick becoming nervous as he said, "Captain, really, Schanke was too drunk to know what he was seeing--"

"Maybe so," Stonetree replied. "But I wasn't. And I saw him fly too."

Natalie didn't know if it was her own panic or Nick's that she was sensing, but she tried to appear calm as he looked into Stonetree's eyes and said, "You saw nothing..."

But Stonetree was undaunted, and both Nick and Natalie realized at once that in his still weakened state, Nick would not be able to make the Captain forget.

"Don't waste your strength," Stonetree said knowingly, his voice kind. "Nick, I'm not as blind as Schanke--or as gullible."

"I don't know what you mean--" Nick began, but stopped as he realized it was pointless.

"Nick, I've known--or suspected--what you are for a long time."

"What is it you think I am?" he asked, centuries of hiding the truth having taught him not to give himself up so easily.

"The same thing as that guy, as your friend Janette, and probably half the people in that club of hers--a vampire."

It was said. Now it had to be dealt with. "What do you plan to do, Captain?" he asked dully, afraid that his life--their life--here in Toronto was through. But Stonetree's response shocked them both.

"Nothing."

"Nothing?" Nick and Natalie asked in unison.

Stonetree's sympathetic expression was unmistakable. "Nick, you're the best damn detective on the force. Do you think I'm going to lose you just to open up my mouth about something no one would believe anyway?" He shrugged. "I couldn't even tell my wife--she'd think I was working too hard." He sighed deeply, glad to see them both smile with relief. "Your secret's safe."

"Thank you, Captain," Nick told him gratefully. A moment earlier he had feared that all here was lost. But now he knew that the one man upon whom his existence here depended would be henceforth an ally.

Stonetree stood to leave, his face becoming serious. "Nick, is that guy gone for good? Did he get what he wanted?"

Nick's own countenance became somber. "Yeah, he got what he wanted. He won't be back again in your lifetime, Captain."

Stonetree nodded, no further explanation necessary. All that was his domain had been covered. "Well, you two take some time off to relax. Just let me know when you've decided what your story's going to be on what happened last night, and I'll send a uniform over to take a statement."

Nick said he would, as Stonetree added, "You might want to do something to make Schanke forget, though. Otherwise, he'll drive us both crazy!"

And as he left, Nick and Natalie looked at each other with a mixture of surprise and relief.

"I really thought that was going to be it, this time, Nat. I didn't want to have to start all over."

She took his hand, looking into his eyes. "At least this time you wouldn't have had to do it alone."

He drew her into his arms, kissing her. She was right, and despite all that had happened, there was a certain peace in knowing that he would never be alone again.

April had brought in the Spring and baseball, and now that he was fully recovered, Nick was going to enjoy both. Natalie had surprised him with two tickets to a game, and they sat now in the **upper** upper deck of Skydome, watching a pitching duel between the Blue Jays and the Minnesota Twins.

"This is great," he said enthusiastically as he slipped his arm around her. "Too bad the dome's not open so we could get some fresh air."

"We can practically touch the top of it from here," she commented, looking up. "I gather your fear of heights is gone." At his nod, she looked down. "It's a good thing. I never realized how steep it is up here. I feel like if I bend over too far, I'll fall."

"That's what the guard rails are for--to hold on." He looked at her with a gleam in his eye. "Don't worry--if you fall, I'll fly down and catch you."

"Oh yeah, and be televised all over North America doing it," she teased.

"You're right," he said in mock seriousness. "I guess I'll just have to hold you tight and make sure you're safe."

"That's fine with me." She put her feet up on the rail, settling back against him.

For a long while they sat watching the game, until finally, at the end of another scoreless inning, she looked up from the crook of his arm and said, "Nick, I'm really sorry this couldn't be a day game. I know how much you were looking forward to that."

"It's okay," he told her, kissing her on the cheek. "The season's young. Anyway, I'm having fun. Aren't you?"

"Mm-hmm. The only thing that would make this night perfect would be a hot dog--" She scanned the area, and a few seconds later said, "Nick, look! There's the hot dog guy--"

Nick called him over, ordering her frankfurter as she reached into her bag. She pulled out a small thermos, and handed it to him.

He twisted open the top to reveal the white protein drink she'd prepared for him. He studied it a moment, then replaced the cap. He looked up at the vendor. "Make that two, please. Extra ketchup on the second."

Natalie stared at him as he paid for their food, too moved to speak. He handed her her frank, then shrugged his shoulders. "I've got to start somewhere."

He took a bite, chewed it, swallowed it...liked it. Then took another. Natalie simply watched him in awe, then

put her arms around his neck. "I love you," she whispered, her eyes glowing.

"I love you, too," he said softly. And as he kissed her, he realized that the desire building inside him was not vampiric at all, but very human...

Another step taken. It would all be theirs again.

Soon.

But I won't cry for yesterday.
There's an ordinary world somehow I have to find.
And as I try to make my way to the ordinary world
I will learn to survive.
Duran Duran

Nocturnal beauty, wild and wise
Amber-haired with clear blue eyes
True to the Hippocratic Oath
And to forensic science both
Lean of flank, blood of scarlet hue
Intelligent and frightening to me too
Eager to hunt in medical things
Longing gives our hearts both wings.
Autumn comes for you so soon
Mortals die, no one's immune.
Beauteous darling, Natalie. I would not trade
Eagle's flight if you're afraid.
Resistant to the vampire wiles,
Thoughts of your remembered smiles
Make me wish that loving you forever
Didn't mean so short a time..that time would be less clever.

by Cicatrice du Veritas

How do I love thee...
Elizabeth Barrett Browning had been a shut-in
and wrote poems to the one she loved.
She did not let him see them for years.
I read the **Sonnets** when I was in secondary.
As a girl I dreamed of a knight in shining armour
who would love me forever.
And I dreamed of being a doctor.
I read a theory of her time, that ghosts
and creatures of the night invaded
homes and sucked the life from sensitive souls.
Ridiculous, you say, there are no such things as ghosts
But you haunt me.

E.B. Browning hid behind words where she felt safe,
away from strangers and friends.
I walled myself away with strong words
and a strong will and my work.
You confronted me with an impossibility and a mystery.
You've sent me on a quest which is a matter of death-in-life
for you.
You sent a coroner to conquer death.

Did you know Elizabeth Barrett Browning?
From the pictures I've seen she looked like her spaniel
with wide eyes and wavy hair and a hunter's intensity.
'Though she did not believe it, she had it all--
talent, beauty, love.
All I believe that I have is my work.
She continued to write even while something was
burning her life from within.
Did you bring her over with that line?
...I shall but love thee better after death.

by Cicatrice du Veritas

The Conversation

by Valerie C. Nolan

"Come, Cherie. Until Nicolas returns from this tedious police call, let us have a tête a tête. Sit down and tell me how you met Nicolas and how you plan to turn him into a mortal again. Tell me, do they teach fantasy at medical school these days? They used to in the middle ages, but they called it science then. Such amusing times."

"No, they don't teach fantasy. They do teach biology and chemistry. The very real changes I see in Nick's biochemistry when he alters his behavior show me that his dream is not a fantasy."

"Oh, ma petite! If you only knew how many earnest, dedicated young women over the centuries have been enlisted to help our friend regain his humanity. It simply does not work. Oh, he can get close to crossing over, but then he reverts. And when he does, his anger and disappointment will be directed at you as well as himself."

"He's a grown man; I think he can handle a setback or two and keep trying."

"No, no. You do not understand. Nicolas is not a 'grown man'; after 800 years, very little of the man remains. Nick is a predator, a hunter in the night. This is his nature. The 'humanity' you see is a thin veneer, a mask to lull the unwary...we all do it. The glimpses of ferocity you have seen--that is the truth of the hunter."

"You seem to have very little faith in Nick, very little belief in the strength of his conscience and repentance."

"Oh, I believe he believes it--for now. But what you see as a life-changing decision, I know is the whim of one who needs a new challenge to keep existence fresh. New sensations are hard to come by after so many centuries, and Nicolas has always been restless."

"Well, whim or not--medical science has advanced to the point where it is very possible for Nick to regain his mortality. And I believe Nick wants that with all his heart. And I want it for him."

"Sweet, Cherie, but so naive. We are a very close society, one based on power, and dominance. Nicolas has made many enemies over the years. I could name five in this city alone who would relish taking him the moment he crosses over. Whether to return him to us, or to end him, who knows? As a whim, this obsession is amusing. As a possibility, it is a danger to Nicolas and to all who have aligned themselves with him in this game."

"Surely Nick knows that as well as you?"

"Most assuredly. But has he contemplated that there are also those who would consider the most amusing way to hurt Nicolas would be to take you, and so remove his hope of returning?"

"What are you saying? Is that a threat?"

"A warning, perhaps. But come, this is too serious a conversation, and the music is playing. I have customers to see to, and my own concerns. And here is Nicolas."

"Hi, Nat. You look serious. What happened?"

"Oh, I sat down for a little chat with Janette and got a lesson in power politics I won't soon forget."

"Hmmm? Oh, she lives for drama and intrigue. But there is usually some truth to what she says; she's very intelligent."

"Yes, that came through loud and clear. Look, I've got a busy day tomorrow, so I'm going to cut out."

"Is everything okay?"

"Yes, I'm fine. I just have a lot of new things to think about, and a bit of a headache."

"Sure? Take care of yourself."

"...I intend to."

The Phone Call

by Valerie C. Nolan

Don Schanke, that man among men, reclined in his lounge chair, and dialed his cellular phone.

"Hey, Mike! Mike Palmeri! Howya doin' partner!"

"Schanke? Don Schanke? Hey man, about time I heard from you! How's doin' in T.O.?"

"Well, ya know, I'm doin' my personal best to bring law an' order to the Godless metropolis..."

"So the crime rate is soarin'? I hear ya!"

"Hey! Hey! Doesn't help matters when a man's partner up and moves to 'Bahstahn'--say, how's Angie and the baby?"

"Great, just great. Mikey is three now, and he's got this Barney crap all over the house. And your family? How's Myra?"

"Hey, we're great. Myra, my goddess, still makes the best damn souvlaki in the hemisphere...of course, if you were still here, you'd know that."

"Man, I gotta tell ya, I miss bein' a cop."

"So why don't you take your exam?"

"Ah, I got no seniority here--I'd never make homicide detective before retirement. But mostly, Angie'd kill me if I quit real estate to get shot at again."

"Yeah, Myra just keeps takin' out more insurance on me! Still, we miss ya here."

"We were a great team, Man. Hey, so tell me about your latest partner."

"Knight? Oh he's a real piece of work--ya got all day?"

"Football's over, Schanke, I got all month. So, he's nuts?"

"Nah, not nuts, just weird. Lemme tell ya, it's a good thing he is or he wouldn't be in homicide."

"Whatta ya mean?"

"Well, first off, the guy is gorgeous. Don't get me wrong, Myra still lights the fire, but even I gotta admit Knight looks good. He's mid-thirties, blond hair, blue eyes, baby face the chicks go for."

"So he should be workin' PR for the department, right?"

"Right, 'cept he's got this, like, strange allergy to sunlight, so he has to work the night shift. And he's a culture freak--art and shit all the time. Got a Classic Caddy convertible we ride in. Ever heard of a homicide cop in a convertible? And he's, like, real neurotic about food--won't eat around other people, won't even take a drink of water."

"Great! So, naturally, you were the guy to put him with, right?"

"Hey, I'm a man of the people; and I have to admit, I smooth the way for him at times. But Knight's a good cop. He can get confessions out of people soooo smoothly--just looks 'em in the eye, and they can't talk fast enough. Got a temper, though."

"Yeah? As bad as Joey Murphy?"

"Old Joey! Man, he was somethin' else. Nah, Knight just puts the fear of God into 'em--I swear, they'll be gettin' booked, and beggin' the desk sergeant not to leave 'em alone with Nick--and he hasn't laid a finger on 'em!"

"Useful. Of course, your breath has the same effect."

"Careful, Mike. Remember, I know all about your gyum socks."

"Good point. So, you get along?"

"Yeah. As well as anyone gets along with him. Oh, wait, I take that back. I've forgotten about the ladies..."

"Don't stop now, Schanke!"

"Had ya goin', didn't I? Knight's got a couple of real cuties going--I can't figure out what the hell's happening."

"Yeah? Yeah?"

"Same old Mike! Well, first, he's got the pathologist as sort of his 'personal physician', if you know what I mean."

"Al Goldfarb? That's gross!"

"No, you fool--Al retired... the new pathologist is 'Natalie', and for a woman who cuts up dead guys all day, she's all right. Wears lab coats and rubber gloves."

"Nothin' else?"

"Hey, hey! You're a married man! Nat is a real sweet person, and she's smart and good lookin'. Makes me wonder what she thinks about Janette."

"Janette? Janette? Oh, I want to hear more about 'Janette'!"

"Down, boy! 'Janette' runs this kinda kinky nightclub, The Raven, and she and Nick go, like, way back."

"Kinky nightclubs? Man, I miss being a cop."

"Wild place. Janette is french or Scandanavian or somethin'--got a real sexy accent, wears those choker things? Anyway, Nick says she's just an old friend, but I don't kiss my old friends like that."

"How do you kiss your old friends?"

"You'll never know, Palmeri, you'll never know."

"So, one girlfiriend spends all dy with corpses, and the other one spends all night with kinky sickos...sounds like the man has excellent taste!"

"Well, he has me around to keep him on the straight and narrow--show him the benefits of married life."

"And you have him around to take you to kinky nightclubs!"

"Hey, that's why they call it a partnership!"

"Schanke, I gotta go--Angie's on call waiting, and I gotta pick her up from her mother's. Great talkin' to you, Man."

"Same here, Palmeri--sell lots of houses."

"Remember me to the guys, Schank. And keep your head down!"

"Would I risk this face in the line of fire? Hasta la bye-bye, Mike. Love to the family."

"And to yours. Adi-yo-yos!"

Don Schanke, that man among men, lowered the aerial on his cellular phone, and went to look for a snack.

O Valiant Knight

by Christine E. Hantzopulos Hunt

O Valiant Knight of the Crusades
who gold bejeweled cross did bear,
enraptured me with eyes of daylight
   sky and sunlit golden hair.
Bursting with a youth and passion!
Lust for life in all its glory!
In eternity I would possess you;
thus began your tragic story.

With human love I would seduce you;
with tender kisses that promised more.
You took the gifts willingly offered,
not knowing just what lay in store.
For as you ravaged immortal flesh,
awakening passions long forgotten,
Another waited to defile you--
--the latest of his spawn begotten.

Though immortality did beckon,
and Unholy thirst drove you to slay,
your victims' souls preyed on your conscience,
as you longed to see the light of day.
The Valiant Knight who had many slain
--in the name of the Christian Lord--
found he could not kill for lust.
To feed on innocence he deplored.

Though our Master tried to instruct you
in the nature of our cursed existence,
you'd take no more than to survive,
denying your own blood's insistence.
For centuries you sought to escape our grasp,
feeding only to your life sustain;
while Humanity you did repay,
to ease your troubled spirit's pain.

But do you remember Parisian nights
with eternity within our reach
when you would beg to share my blood?
To join with me, you would beseech.
In all your quests for mortal love,
has any of them e'er compared,
to the ecstasy **our** union brought,
the eternal bond that we have shared?

Reject the Master's mind control!
Deny the nature of your Beast!
But while loyalty to him diminished,
the connection that we shared increased.
O, my love, my Valiant Knight,
forgive my role in his evil endeavor!
For though I led you down this path,
my purest love is yours, Forever.

The Celebration

by Wanda Lee vonSeeberg

For some reason he didn't understand, a meeting had been called involving all those who had come over to immortality--those living the same existence as he had, thanks to LaCroix. What wasn't evident was exactly why they had called him. Nick mused this as he made his way toward the location, ever alert for some type of trick. Walking through the dark tunnel as directed by the doorman, into he didn't know what, he stopped short. Suddenly the Enforcers stood there, barring his way. Nick wasn't sure what they could possibly want. It seemed they stood there silently for the longest time, before they started snarling and spitting at him. They finally stood aside, allowing him to pass through into an opening that had only now become visible.

Inside, many of his kind mingled around, but they turned, suddenly silent, to watch him enter. He had the definite feeling that they had been waiting just for **his** arrival. That was when **she** walked in. Nick was almost breathless from her beauty. She watched him closely, and then approached him slowly.

"You have to be Nicholas," she commented, apparently knowing more about him than he did her.

"I am," he answered, not willing to give away information that he did not need to.

Several of the others opened a pathway for them as she took his arm and guided him toward a huge table that had been set for a celebration of some kind.

Nick looked over at the woman, her hair falling delicately over her bare right shoulder. Her eyes were emerald green, her hair the most beautiful blond--almost white--he'd ever seen. "What's the occasion?" he asked.

She didn't answer, but rather motioned for him to sit next to her at the head of the table. This is when he noticed a huge altar that lay behind thick gauze curtains. He allowed his gaze to wander about the room. On one wall there were paintings of himself, in other times, down through the ages, as if he'd been watched. Here his eyes paused, looking at each one in turn.

Since his induction into this world in 1228, he'd lived

many lives, or at least pretended to. A few pictures had other people gathered around him, but most of them were of him alone--as usual. Suddenly Knight felt dizzy, as a noise caused him to turn to see someone enter the room. It was the very One who had brought him over to this life. LaCroix. Nick was confused; after all, hadn't he destroyed his Sire? LaCroix glanced over at Knight. "Welcome to your feast, Nicholas," he said, laughing, and then took a seat. Everyone began milling about the room, and in turn took their places at the table. Nick shivered.

The woman raised a glass in a toast. "To Nicholas," she said, holding the drink out to Nick. He accepted it, smelled its aroma, and then looked around at LaCroix.

"Yes," he answered to Nick's unvoiced question. "In your honor, we drink only cow's blood at this table. Not that I had anything to do with it," he added with great distaste.

The woman quickly gave LaCroix a stern look that for an instant made Nick think he saw fear on his face. But it faded away just as quickly as it had appeared. Nick turned back to the woman, who was beginning to toast him.

"To Nicholas Knight, the one and only true love of my life." She smiled, turned the glass up, and drank.

Nick jumped up, quickly grabbing his napkin to wipe the blood from the table where he had just dropped his own drink. He looked back at her and she was laughing, not at him, but enjoying his nervousness.

"Uh, sorry," he apologized. Someone handed him another drink and he turned back to the woman, taking his seat, fidgeting a little.

Once again, she gave off a soft laugh, but then became very serious. "I have always admired you, Nicholas, and have wanted to meet you one day; but only now would the Enforcers allow it." She glanced over at the two menacing figures that were standing at the only exit. Nick looked at them, and they snarled back, showing that they still didn't agree completely with this meeting, and disapproved to some extent even now. "It has taken a lot of convincing, though," she added.

"Well," he began, "here I am, and I don't even know your name." Actually, he didn't know what else to say. Several people were mumbling and whispering, wondering why he didn't know the one who would offer the special gift to him; the one who had made them drink cow's blood for his celebration. They plainly did not like their drinks, but when she gave a toast, they dared not express their displeasure, since she was now their Queen.

"Not so bad once you get used to it," she offered as she noticed the frowns all around the room. They quickly agreed. She gave off her little laugh and turned back to the guest of honor. "I am Bernadette Rijeka Susak." She waited a moment to see any reaction from him, and went on. "I am from the old country, and it was there when you came over to us that I first met you. I watched as you were taught our ways.

I waited for you to fully accept things as they are, but you never seemed to enjoy this life that was given to you." She paused again. Nick just sat there, a blank look on his face, but inside his mind was whirling, trying to recall this woman who seemed to know everything about his life.

"Sorry," he almost said out loud, but thought better of it as those around him leaned forward in their seats to hear his answer. "I do seem to recall someone always watching from a distance." In his mind, he once again called up that vision that had haunted him down through time. It was she. Why had he not met her before? **Oh, yes. The Enforcers would not allow it. But why?** Out loud he said, "It is a pleasure to finally get to meet you, Bernadette Susak." Everyone seemed pleased with his reaction, and began chatting, enjoying themselves immensely.

Bernadette stood and walked over to Knight, took his hand in her dainty one, and pulled him to his feet. "Come with me," she whispered in his ear. He leaned over to hear better, since she was shorter than he was, and the party was getting louder. Without question, he followed her through the gauze curtains to the altar. Suddenly all the pent-up anger and regret concerning the time in 1228, when he had been given the gift of eternal life, returned to him. There he was, lying on that same altar once again, with LaCroix hanging over him, saliva dripping from his fangs.

"How are you tonight, Nicholas?" he asked. "I do hope you are comfortable." He let out one of his hideous laughs. Leaning backwards, he turned his head sideways to look over at a woman standing just on the other side of the curtain. Her hair was blowing loosely in the wind that had just come up around her. She was watching Nick as he lay there helpless, on the cold hard surface of the stone altar.

"Get on with it," she said to LaCroix.

He stopped smiling, snarled, and turned back to Nick. "Nicholas of Brabant," he began, "I now send you into an eternal darkness from which you will never return." Nick groaned, looking up at him. Leaning over, LaCroix grabbed Nick's head, turning it away from him, exposing the neck just right for his bite. He began to sink his teeth into his victim's neck, and Nick was helpless to defend himself. Suddenly the assault stopped. The woman had a hand on LaCroix, pulling him away from Nicholas. Blood dripped from his teeth, down his chin. He plainly was not happy for the interruption.

"Do not kill him, LaCroix, or I will have my friends take care of you," she threatened, motioning to the two dark shadows in the background. That was the first time Nick had seen the Enforcers. Already weakened from the loss of blood, his eyes were blurry as she leaned over and kissed his wound. Turning back to LaCroix, she warned once more, "Be careful with him."

Nick had passed out then, and that was all he could remember. He was once more back in the present with Bernadette Susak, and felt a bit shaky. She reached up,

placing a soft hand on his shoulder. "Come with me," she said. Not able to resist because of the emotional drain he'd just relived, he followed, the Enforcers a short distance behind. Nick looked back at them, and they snarled, hissing their distaste for him.

"What's their problem?" he asked Bernadette as she led him to a chamber illuminated with black lights. A huge round bed covered with red silk sheets was in the middle of the room. There, near the night stand, was a bottle of Nick's private port. Next to that was an object that caught his attention. Bernadette saw him looking at it, walked around the bed, and picked it up. It was a ring that had once belonged to his family back in the 1200's, that for some reason she had kept all these ages. She handed it to him.

"This is yours," she stated, not saying another word.

Knight looked into her eyes. She truly wanted him to have it. She held the ring up to him. He reached out and took it, taking in a soft short breath. "This was my great-grandfather's," he whispered. "It was supposed to be mine when I took over the Estate." Before he could say anything else, Bernadette walked back toward the door to the two Enforcers standing there.

"You can go now," she said. They responded in their usual manner, looking over at Nick and giving him an ugly snarl. It was some sort of warning, he supposed. But then they turned and left as they had been told. Bernadette returned to stand beside Knight, placing her small hands on his as he slid the ring onto his index finger, the only one that could manage such a large ornament. He looked into her eyes and saw tears welling up there. Reaching over, he wiped away a tear falling down her face. She smiled up at him, squeezing his hand a little.

"Thank you," he said. She responded once again with a smile, but was silent otherwise. "Where did you get this?" he asked.

"I've had it since your father gave it to me," she answered.

"What do you mean?" he asked. "When did my father give it to you?"

"At the time when you were brought over to us, he discovered who we were--and had to be destroyed. Realizing that he couldn't help you, he handed this to me, asking that you have it one day when you would know that LaCroix had used your father's blood to celebrate your indoctrination."

Anger rose inside Nick. His eyes flashed. His fangs extended. He whirled around to go after his enemy, but Bernadette's hand and voice stopped him. "You must forget that, Nicholas," she said. "If you insist on revenge, you and I will have no future together."

This took him totally by surprise. He calmed down a bit, and turned to Bernadette. "What did you say?" he asked, not sure if he had heard correctly.

"You and I have been chosen to bring the second young one into our world by procreation," she stated matter-of-factly. Nick stumbled backwards onto the bed.

"I didn't think that was possible," he almost whispered. She came over and sat down beside him, touching his face, turning it towards her own. She kissed him lightly on the neck, right where she had so many ages ago, kissed his cheek, and reached with her lips to his own. He didn't object. In fact, he was really enjoying the attention, when suddenly he stiffened, pushing her away. He was very adamant.

"I won't bring a life into this world to live a curse that I've tried to escape throughout the ages," he stated flatly.

Once again, her hand gently turned his face to hers. "We think the child will be normal." Taking his hand, she led him back to the bed. She sat down, patted the spot next to her, and Nick responded by sitting beside her.

"I am not at all what you think I am," she began. Before he could interrupt, she continued. "At the time you were brought over, I was only partly one of you. Let me finish," she said, placing her fingers on his lips to quiet him. "I chose to be one of you because I was promised a time when I could meet you and become one with you."

"You chose to become a vampire?" he asked, hardly believing his ears.

"Yes, I did," she answered, smiling back at his puzzled face. "I chose to become one of you rather than die a merciless death without you."

"That's what I thought," Knight stated. "You had no choice."

"No, no," she corrected. "When you were shown to me, on that altar, and I was promised your hand some day, I decided I'd like to be beside you for eternity. You have recently passed the Enforcers' inspection. Sort of," she added.

"Why would you do such a thing of your own free will?" Nick asked, still astonished. But he realized that he had chosen as well, not really understanding, at the time, what it all would mean. Bernadette sat there deep in thought, and then reached her hand to his forehead.

Suddenly, he was not longer there, but somewhere in the distant past, a time that had been blanked from his mind. He stood by a pool of crystal clear water, looking at a reflection from the other side. It was an angel, he thought at first, as he looked up to see Bernadette standing there, her gown and long wavy hair flowing in the wind. She was looking into the water at his reflection. Suddenly, he realized that he could see her image in the water. He looked down at his own image, and then to hers. Beside her was someone he recognized. He cried out, "Father!" and reached out for him, sobbing.

"Listen to her, son," came his voice, "she has the key to something you've searched for all these years."

"What?" asked Nick, watching his father fade from the picture.

Once more he was in the chamber with Bernadette. She was holding a picture of a child, a little boy who was the most beautiful child Knight had ever seen.

"This is the first one of many, we hope," she said. Nick took the photo, touched it gently with his fingers, and looked back to Bernadette.

"His name is Nathaniel Matthews, and he is five years old," she said, introducing the little boy who walked into the bedroom where they were. He was a bit shy, and it took some coaxing for him to walk over to them. Nathaniel smiled at Bernadette as she introduced her guest. "This is Nicholas Knight," she said, and turned to him. "Nathaniel, meet Nick."

Nick held out his arms, and the boy got onto his lap and leaned back on his shoulder. Knight brushed a wisp of hair out of his small face, giving him a hug, and a kiss on the forehead. "Glad to meet you, young man," he said. The boy answered back in a shy, but strong, voice.

"I, too, am glad to make your acquaintance."

Knight jerked his head slightly, and looked at Bernadette with surprise.

"Yes," she stated, "he is highly intelligent. And he is more human than we are," she explained. "Just as I would have been had I chosen not to allow the taking of my blood." She nodded at Nathaniel. "One day, he will choose if he wishes to become more one of us than now. Or, he may choose to stay as he is and marry a mortal, just as may father did in his time. It was frowned upon then, but is more accepted today, even by the Enforcers."

A woman walked into the room, took Nathaniel's hand, and walked out with him, after acknowledging Knight and Bernadette. "She is his mother," said Bernadette. "She is human, and his father is one of us. He chose to expose his body to the sun and perish. His hope was that Nathaniel would choose to live in the day, as does his mother."

"How can he live, being exposed to the sun?" Knight was truly puzzled. "Nathaniel is still one of us, right?"

"We aren't quite sure how, but it is the cross-breeding that allows a certain immunity to the killer rays. A child of ours would be the same," she added, gently touching his cheek. She smiled at him, and handed him something else--a single silver thread. As he took it from her, she laughed in her gentle way, and said, "Let me show you what it's for." She took it back, placed her left hand in the palm of his, and began to wrap it around, binding them together. "In this manner we shall be as one, bonded together in this endeavor."

"You mean, married?" he asked, startled. "I don't think I'm ready...for settling down with one person."

"We shall be united this one time to bring an offspring into the world, who will help Nathaniel to bring our people back to what they once were."

Nick interrupted. "You mean, human?" he asked, hopefully.

"Almost, but not quite," she answered. "But," she added, "they will have the choice of living more like mortals, or becoming like us. The more these offspring

interbreed, the more they will become mortal. Isn't that your dream? Your friend. What's her name?"

"I'd rather not say," he answered, not sure where this was leading.

"She's very intelligent. That's okay," said Bernadette. "I know who she is. You can accept her into our world if you wish, after you and I have had our time. She will help you, as my mother did in her time. She chose to stay mortal, and died in old age. My father loved her until the end," stated Bernadette. "Your friend might even find a cure after all, or at least an artificial blood that will nourish our bodies just as human blood does."

"You mean that would be possible?" he asked. "I mean, to marry a mortal?"

"I see," began Bernadette, "you fear that you will turn on her during your lovemaking. It is possible, but that is her choice to make. As far as I can tell, she is in love with you."

A noise came from the door, and they both turned to see the Enforcers standing there. "It is time," one of them said in a gruff, hissing voice.

Nick gulped in spite of himself. "They're going to watch?" he asked, shocked.

"No, silly," she said, laughing. "It is time we let the others know about our bonding. That is, if you are willing," she added.

He thought for a moment. The Enforcers were there, and they fully expected him to do as he was bid. He didn't seem to have a choice, but he felt that Bernadette was truly attracted to him, as he was now becoming to her.

"Okay," he answered. "If it is as you say, then a whole new future is now beginning for us. Let's go." He stood up and followed Bernadette as she led him out the same way she had led him in.

She cleared her voice, not once, but three times, before the Enforcers grew angry and quieted everyone. You could hear blood drip on the floor. "I have an announcement," she said. She hugged Nick's arm, looked into his face and back to her guests. "He has consented to bond with me long enough to bring a new life into our world." Cheers went up. Great excitement spread throughout the room. Many clapped. She held up her hand for silence. This time there was quiet. "We will bond only long enough, with our scientists' help, to conceive; then he will go back to his life, and I to mine." She looked over at Nick. "However, he will be as involved with her life as I, if he so wishes."

Nick wanted to ask a million questions. How did she know it'd be a girl? But this wasn't the time or place to do that. He stood there silently until they asked for a speech. Still, he was not comfortable with these people. He shuffled his feet. They wouldn't take no for an answer, and so he began, "I am honored to know Bernadette." He watched the others closely. "I am in favor of helping us become more mortal. Or at least have the choice to do," he added, when he saw displeasure on some of their faces.

Bernadette broke in. "One more toast, and everyone can go."

They raised their glasses toward them and saluted the bonding and the future life that would be created. After drinking their drinks, someone said, "It's not really that bad."

Another voice piped up, "You're sick!"

Bernadette waved good bye to them, and without any further ado, took Nick's hand and led him back to the bedroom. Nick looked around in time to see the Enforcers leave as well. Just he and Bernadette were left. He hoped he could get in the mood, that is, since he had no choice. No, that was a lie and he knew it. He had made the choice.

Bernadette went over to the bed and pulled back the sheets. She stood back, undid a string, and let her gown fall. Nick had never seen anyone so beautiful. He felt something stir that he had not been prepared for. He was more beast than man now, and went to her willingly. She met him with her teeth extended, and her eyes glowing. They kissed and nibbled each other's necks. Her fingernails dug deeply into his back, and he was lost in the moment. She let out a beautiful laugh when it was all over, and cuddled up next to him. He had never loved so deeply as they had just done. There was no fear of hurting Bernadette. She was just as strong as he was, and it gave him a freedom he had never known. Would she allow him to repeat this act, he wondered? He didn't have to wonder for long. She practically leaped on him, surprising him because she'd not been so aggressive before. Now she was the animal, and he let it happen. Soon he was so high on their bonding that he forgot the time. She didn't allow him to rest for hours, and he didn't mind. He kissed her body, and nibbled her blood, and she did the same in return. Soon things began to quiet down. They both were exhausted, and just lay there in each other's company. Nick began to feel a real love for this woman by the name of Bernadette Rijeka Susak. He was really happy for the first time since...actually, he couldn't recall the last time he had felt so free and happy. "Maybe marriage wouldn't be so bad," he said out loud. He turned over on his side, facing Bernadette.

"You are caught up in the moment, my love," she said, "Wait until later, when your mind is clear, and you have thought it over. I would not have a bondmate that felt trapped." She saw the frown on his face, and added, "I, too, would like that, but right now we must wait and see what our joining has brought." She touched his neck, concerned. "Did I hurt you?"

He'd hardly felt it when she had taken his neck in her teeth and bitten into it, tasting his blood for the first time. That was when she, herself, had turned into an animal. He looked at her, and touched her neck where he had bitten into her, taking her life force into his own soul. They would truly be one, no matter which way life took them. He trailed his hand down to her slim belly, and patted it. "Do you think it worked?" he asked.

She smiled at him, and nodded, giggling softly. Suddenly he felt like a little kid. Beside himself with joy, he lay back, taking in the moment. She, too, was quiet. He started to speak, but stopped when he heard her low, even breathing, a sign that she had drifted off to sleep.

Soon he joined her in the sweet dreams, and saw the littl girl that would one day be his. She toddled over to him and raised her arms to be taken. He picked her up, and turned as she called, "Mommy!". Bernadette stood there, more beautiful than ever. Nick walked over, and handed the little one to her. Bernadette was once again with child--his child--and he was happy.

He awoke later to find her gone without a good bye. A great sadness came over him, until he looked over at the night stand, and saw the thread that Bernadette had left as a reminder of her love. He rolled back over, and dreamed some more.

****

In a deep, dark space
Lies the loneliest of hearts.
With an unquenchable hunger for life,
and an undying want of love.
No one can join him on this journey.
For it is one of fear and misconception.
To never be able to hold passion or
lust in his hands,
or to comfort pain and sorrow in another.
Forever damned in a life of regret.
Hoping and wanting day.
Disgusted by night.
For his heart is bigger than all hearts,
and his love is purer than all loves.
He has crossed the line of peace and fairness,
and entered one of doom.
His only peace is
peace in death.

by Elizabeth Ortiz

The Dress

by Valerie C. Nolan

What to wear? What to wear? Nick was taking her to dinner and the symphony in honor of her birthday, and her own plans for the end of the evening included breakfast in bed. So...what to wear?

Natalie considered the five evening gowns in the dressing room. The first--a high-necked, royal blue, sequined sheath--highlighted her curves in a very satisfactory fashion. On the other hand, Nick might regard that high neck as a sign she didn't trust him. No, not the sheath.

The next dress--strapless scarlet velvet--she rejected with the muttered comment, "Great, I look like a vampire hors d'oeuvre."

The third--flowing white georgette with a halter top--failed on the grounds that she A) looked like the stereotypical horror movie victim, B) looked like a bride, and C) looked like she could stand to lose ten pounds.

Number four--a severe black column with a sweetheart neckline and jet beading--reminded her of Janette's wardrobe...and the less Nick thought about **her**, the better Natalie liked it.

Number five, on the other hand, was deep rose--the color her cheeks flushed when she imagined Nick's cool touch on her warm flesh. It had a draped, off-the-shoulder neckline that called attention to her breasts; it had a skirt that clung to mid-thigh, and then flared softly to swirl over pumps. And those ten pounds were all in the right places, thank you. Yes. A dress that pointed out that she was all woman--all **mortal** woman--and commented that warmth and life could be very nicely packaged.

Natalie charged the dress, stockings, shoes, earrings, lipstick, evening bag, lace undies, two towels, a lavender peignoir set, and a toothbrush, with an air of dreamy absentmindedness. She didn't hear the saleslerk say to the

dressing room attendant, "Well, that's a well-baited trap!"--but she would have agreed with the remark.

****

6:30 Friday.
The phone in Natalie's apartment rang. And rang. And rang. Standing over it, Natalie carefully counted a casual number of rings before pouncing on the receiver.

"Hello?"

"Nat? It's me, Nick."

Lord, it was pathetic what those smooth, clipped tones could do to a girl's equilibrium.

"Nick! Hi! Did you just wake up?"

"Yes, and I wanted to wish you 'Happy Birthday'. Are we still on for tonight?"

"Thank you, and of course we're still on. What time will you be here?"

"The concert starts at 8, we have dinner reservations for 10:30. I'll pick you up at 7:30."

"Hmmm, I'd better hurry. See you in an hour--bye!"

"Bye, Nat."

****

7:30 PM.
Natalie was watching through the curtains, as she had been for the last 15 minutes. Her heart began to race as she saw the familiar classic Caddy pull up outside. She stepped quickly back from the window, and took a last, anxious look in the mirror. When the doorbell rang, Natalie strolled carefully to the door, took a deep breath, smiled, and opened it.

As always, the first sight of him stopped time for a moment. He stood, still and pale, in the hallway--an elegant figure in black, whose chiseled features and centuries-old sophistication were belied by soft blond curls.

A brush of cool lips against her cheek. "Happy Birthday, Nat. Are you ready?"

Strange how she wanted her mother there to take a picture--to get concrete evidence of how far she'd come since the gawky boys in pastel tuxedos who took her to the prom and to homecoming and to countless semi-formals.

On the other hand, those boys grew up to be bankers and dentists and developers; grew up to marry and have families; grew up to grow old. Natalie knew just how far her date tonight was from those long ago boys--800 years, lifetimes of experience and knowledge, and violent deaths in the hundreds of thousands.

At her shiver, Nick offered to raise the convertible top. She smiled at the consideration in those ancient eyes, and let him think she was cold.

****

7:50, the Concert Hall.

"Hello, I think we've met before. Do you remember? Jarred Wilson? Well, it was some time ago, but I'd never forget that smile."

"I just had to tell you that I'm going to dream of you in that dress tonight. Thank you so much for barely wearing it."

"Hey, gorgeous, here alone?"

"Baby, baby, baby! Damned if I couldn't wrap you up and take you home."

"Here's your program, Nat. Shall we find our seats?"

****

10:50 PM, the restaurant.

"Bonsoir, Monsieur. Enchante, Mademoiselle! What a pleasure to have such a glorious woman visit us tonight. Won't you accept this rose as a token of my esteem? I will do everything possible to make this an enjoyable evening for you, so that you will come back soon and often."

"Steak tartare for me, I think. What will you have, Nat?"

****

12:30AM, at her door.

"I hope you enjoyed the evening, Nat. Happy Birthday."

"Nick, is something wrong?"

"Of course not. Why do you ask?"

"Nick, you've been distant and tense all evening. You've been talking to me like some acquaintance. Is it something I've done?"

"No, Nat. Not at all. I'm sorry if I've seemed preoccupied. I wanted this to be a special evening for you."

"Oh, Nick, it was special--it was wonderful. But I'm worried about you; you're not yourself. No, come in for a minute."

"Just a minute."

"Sit down, Nick. I won't bite."

"It would be better if you did."

"What the hell is that supposed to mean? What have I done? Tell me what I've done that is making you treat me like this. Is it something I said, something I did?"

"Oh, Nat. I'm sorry. It's nothing you did or said. It's me."

"Dammit, Nick, how dare you? How dare you shut me out of your life? Wasn't this supposed to be my night? Couldn't you at least try, even for a few hours, to treat me like I had some feelings?"

"Stop it, Natalie! Stop it! Don't do this to yourself. Please. I just have to keep you at arms length for a while. That's all."

"That's all? What do you mean? Is something going wrong? Are you reverting? How do you feel?"

"Don't touch me."

"Speak to me, Nick. What's the matter?"

"You, dammit! What am I supposed to do when you look like that? When your hair is down, and I want to brush it away and kiss your shoulder? When you wear that dress and I want to touch the fabric and feel your skin move beneath my hands? When you look at me like that and I want to...I want to...I want to. And I daren't try. Natalie, I couldn't stand it--I daren't even try."

****

6:30 PM Saturday.

"Nat? It's me, Nick. I'm sorry about ruining last night. Can we start again? "Sleepless in Seattle" is playing at the cheap show."

"Oh, I love that one. 7:30 show? Pick me up in half an hour."

"....Nat? Wear a sweatshirt and jeans."

****

Not every day at work do I meet someone
Interesting in the same ways as you.
Coming with a life without the light of the sun
Keeper of an eternal hope which is your due.
Killer you've been for over seven hundred years;
Noble; Base; with human foibles and inhuman strengths
Impatient for proof that we have progressed
and to what lengths
Good intentions, and science, and philosophy can go
to quench your fears,
Human and mortal, your desires are few--
To live and love again, our course has just begun.

by Cicatrice du Veritas

Helpless

by Wanda Lee vonSeeberg

Knight quickly closed the trunk of his car, just barely escaping the morning rays of the sun. Daylight seemed to arrive too fast. He knew better, but today had cut his time extra short. He'd taken a great chance of not reaching the safety of his home. Lately, he'd truly been frustrated about his inability to catch a gang that had been breaking into private homes to harass, rob, and, in some cases, murder the occupants. At times he felt handicapped by his gift of immortality. Knight sighed deeply, and with one twist of his hand, he locked the lid down. His fingers stung from the light hitting them.

At least no one can open it from the outside, he thought as he rubbed his hand. At least, he hoped not. He lay there silently. His stomach demanded some nourishment. **Too bad,** he thought, **I should have brought some of my port.** He grinned to himself.

Knight had little time to dwell on his hunger, however. The car was rocking back and forth. A scraping sound, metal against metal. His heart skipped a beat. Someone was actually trying to steal his car in broad daylight in the middle of the city, and there was absolutely nothing he could do. Without thinking, he reached for the release switch that he'd installed to allow himself a quick escape when he could leave the darkness. Anger flooded over him. Eventually, his senses took over. He'd handle these guys when the time was right. Apparently the car had been hot-wired; it was now travelling, at great speed, on its way, undoubtedly, to some car theft ring. Possibly the very characters he'd been chasing for so long.

Suddenly, it hit Knight like a ton of bricks. Whoever these people were, they could probably open the trunk, and he'd be helpless to do anything about it. It seemed he'd been in that position more times than he'd like to admit. His mind raced. What could he do to protect himself? All seemed hopeless.

Just as suddenly as it had started up, the car slid to a halt. "I told you I want no part of kidnapping kids!" Angry voices screamed insults at each other, and then all was silent for a moment. A shot rang out, and someone fell

against the car with a thud, and slid to the ground. A child screamed. Knight jerked himself up, hitting his head. Because of the commotion on the outside, no one had heard him. He closed his eyes and wished once more that he were mortal. At times he actually did feel helpless. The child cried again, and by the sound of it, Knight could tell that someone had flung the kid into the back seat and slammed the door shut, yelling, "Now, stay put, or your ma will pay!" The child whimpered, stifling his sobs against the car seat. Knight raised his hand and gently placed it against the slight bulge he knew to be the boy. He willed him to be calm. His heart broke for the child, and he couldn't do a thing to help right now. His eyes glowed. The car peeled out, flinging gravel behind it.

Before long, they came to a screeching stop. The man was once again yelling at the top of his lungs, "If you don't shut your mouth, I'll bury you just like I did your big brother, or shoot you like your ol' man." Ugly laughter filtered into the trunk where Knight lay waiting for his chance to crush this animal. "Maybe," threatened the man, "I'll do you like I did that wimp back there!" A brief silence, and then, "Now," he warned, "can the racket!"

The car was moving again. Knight growled, his eyes glowed yellow, and his hair bristled. He could sense the child burying his head against the car seat once more, and Knight touched him in his mind. There was no longer any noise coming from the child. Knight felt that he'd fallen into an uneasy sleep. The car radio began blaring, and suddenly was switched off. The car stopped, and the driver got out. After a short while, he came back to open the rear car door. He was dragging the boy, kicking and screaming, out by his heels. "Please," the child begged, "don't hurt me!" His small voice was rising with fear.

He couldn't be more than five, Knight thought to himself. He groaned and his hand went for the latch, but seemed to freeze in mid-air. Nothing he could do. Tears welled up in his eyes.

"You do as I say, boy, or I'll bash your brains in," the man threatened, holding onto the child's hair. "You're money in my pocket, kid." The hair stood up on Knight's neck. He knew very well what this creep meant, and how his kind molested children for fun and profit. He hated them with a passion.

"Where are we going?" screeched the boy. "I want my mama!"

"You'll know soon enough," answered the man gruffly, as he carried the struggling boy under his arm. "Someone wants to see you perform, and you'd better not disappoint me, ya hear?" The child was slipping, and the man just grabbed more hair and kept going.

Knight did open the trunk then, and his hand began to sizzle, the flesh smouldering as smoke rose from his body. Quickly, he jerked it back inside and sealed the lid. Groaning in pain, he held his hand closed until it healed.

He closed his eyes, and sweated blood to keep from opening the trunk again.

"No!" cried the boy, as he was being forced inside an old abandoned farm house, with years of overgrowth covering it.

Another car was parked nearby. A man walked impatiently out of the dilapidated old building to meet them. His beady eyes feasted on the child. "It's about time," he snapped. "I've got a tight schedule..."

The kidnapper grabbed him fiercely by the beard. "You want to keep this?" he asked.

"Just wondering," the guy whimpered.

Silence followed except for the child's crying. Somehow he managed to squirm away during the argument, and ran for the car as if he knew he'd be safe there. The man ran after him, grabbed him by the collar of his jacket, and roughly dragged him back to the house. The other man laughed hideously, amused.

Knight clenched his fist. "You animals will pay," he yelled, not caring if they heard. "This I promise you!" They were too busy to pay attention to anything else. He still could not leave the darkness of the trunk. Anger festered inside of him as he could hear the boy's sobs. With his acute hearing, he could tell the child was protesting, and he could also hear the blows that came as answers. The boy still fought his captors off, until his body lay limp and silent on the old ragged rug the men had spread out on the bare floor. A rat scurried off to the safety of its hole.

"Hold on, kid!" Knight tried to will the boy to survive. "Just a little longer! Hold on!" He shut his eyes and summoned all the strength he could. He remembered the anger, and how too many children fell victim to people like these men. The time finally came. Darkness was closing in. Knight didn't even try to unlock the trunk; he just ripped it off. As he got his bearings, and located the old farmhouse back against some trees, he heard another scream. They were getting ready to molest the child again. Knight's eyes glowed amber. He growled and lifted off the ground, focusing in on the activity and sounds up ahead, no matter how sickening. He could see through the building. The two men had the child sprawled out on the floor. He was already covered with bruises. One of the men was creeping closer to the boy. Knight roared from deep inside. He wasn't about to let that happen. His fangs dripped and rage changed his face to the old vampire he once was. He burst through the huge picture window with superhuman strength. His eyes drilled into their minds and they screamed with sheer terror. Knight's eyes caught photographs of other children victimized by these people. The men tied to run, but Knight scooped them up like feathers by their necks, and flung them through the window into the shrubs outside. They screamed from pain. Knight followed, lifting each into the air and into the night sky. They were both naked and crying like babies. He wanted to crush their heads like ripe melons.

"Your turn to pay," he snarled. One of the men begged for his life, and promised never to do such a thing again. The other wasn't any braver. They made Knight sick to his stomach. He almost forgot that he no longer drank human blood. Bullies always begged for mercy when it was their turn to suffer. Knight carried them higher. Just as he was about to release them, he could see in his mind how he had begun his life as a vampire, and the One who had made him into what he was. This was exactly what LaCroix would do. How exhilarated he would be to see Nick go berserk, in a weak moment of rage returning to his old habits of feasting on human blood. Knight remembered also that he was a police officer, sworn to uphold the law; these men must pay for the crimes they'd committed. Knight snapped back to reality. Slowly, regretfully, he floated toward the ground. The two men, whimpering and cowering, fell the last few feet. Before they realized what was happening, Knight had handcuffed them around a tree face to face. They were still nude.

"Can't we have our clothes?" they begged. Knight snarled in their faces and swore, "If I catch either of you trying something like this again, I'll take you so high up you'll explode." To add to his threat, he flashed his fangs. Quickly, he turned away before his anger took over once more. He walked toward the farm house.

Knight went over to the small boy, who was still in a daze. "Don't be afraid," he said, gently placing his hand on the child's forehead. He gazed into the boy's eyes and wrapped him in his jacket. His tiny body trembled. He buried his face into Knight's chest. Nick willed him courage to continue, and forgetfulness of the awful thing that had happened. As soon as he helped the police put these men in prison, he would forget the pain and horror of that night, and would go on with his life. He was lucky; Knight had found evidence that other children brought there had not been so fortunate.

Knight reached for the car phone, and alerted the authorities to what had happened. The boys's parents had been located, and both were in stable condition in a local hospital.

Knight dragged himself home before sunrise to try to get some rest, and to contemplate his role in life, and its meaning. The child whose mind he had cleared of any recollection of the attack, would grow up whole and healthy. Knight drifted into a fitful sleep. He wasn't so lucky. He couldn't forget.

Çağrı Sarı

The Issue

A Sequel to "One Day in the Sun"

by Christine Hantzopulos Hunt

Natalie regarded the dry toast and tea for a full five minutes before pushing it aside in disgust. What would be the use? She hadn't been able to keep very much food down in the past two weeks, and today would be no exception. She stood from the breakfast table, found her way to the bathroom mirror, and studied her reflection. Make-up wouldn't obscure the tired dark bags under her eyes, nor brighten her drawn features. She'd dragged herself to work like this for too many days, leaving herself open to a barrage of questions: why did she look so pale? Why was she losing so much weight?

"Not today, Sidney," she told the grey and white cat that had jumped up to the vanity to observe her. She rubbed him lightly on the forehead, a smile escaping her lips as her feline companion's eyes became thin slits, and he purred in pleasure. "At least someone feels good today."

She slipped back under the covers, Sidney snuggling against her as she dialed the phone.

"Grace, this is Natalie. I can't make it in, today. Okay, that'll be fine. Oh, and Grace? Did Nick call at all?" Disappointment flooded her voice. "Okay, well, if he does...just tell him I'm home."

She hung up the receiver, clinging to an obliging pussycat as if he were a teddy bear. How long had it been since she'd seen Nick? Days? Weeks? Her time with him had dwindled so over the last month. While she had been stuck on day shifts, he'd of course, continued to work at night. And though he called her once a day, the conversations had become increasingly strained. Had he eaten today? Had he kept away from the blood? His answers, at first enthusiastic, had become apologetic as the pressures at work had put his efforts towards humanity on the back burner. And the protein drinks which she'd left for him in his refrigerator had gone untouched, while the bottles of blood had slowly emptied. Finally she'd stopped asking, stopped pushing so hard lest he feel pressured. There was just so

much she could do. Between them it had become an unspoken issue, a wall which each passing day fortified.

He's given up. He's not trying anymore. And she knew that it was his own disappointment with himself that was keeping him from her.

So now, at a time when she needed him most, when she longed to tell him what was happening to her, she could not. In her rational moments, she knew he was ashamed to face her. But when she felt as she did now, her only thought was that he simply didn't care. It wasn't important enough to him, and neither was she.

And that was what had kept her silent, and would continue to do so. For if he didn't care about her, he wouldn't want to hear what her instincts as both a doctor and a woman told her.

She was carrying his child.

Natalie turned on her side, cuddling Sidney as she closed her eyes. Sleep was the only escape.

If only she didn't see him in all her dreams.

Nick regarded the bottle for a full five minutes before relenting. Then, with anger directed at no one but himself, he drank the thick red liquid with a seemingly insatiable hunger. Yet even as the blood invigorated him, dizzying him with its potency, he threw the bottle to the floor in disgust, watching it shatter into a thousand pieces.

Why did he keep doing this to himself? To Natalie?

He sat on the couch, picking up the polaroid photo he'd framed and left on the coffee table. Natalie smiled vibrantly in his arms as the sun beat down upon them. He stared at the photo as a blood tear filled the corner of his eye. **It was real. It did happen.** For after three months, he'd begun to doubt his own memory. Why couldn't he find the strength to make it happen again?

Oh, there were reasons. Five unsolved murders, and working overtime to cover for those on vacation, had kept him from seeing much of her. And the frustration of all the dead ends he had run into on his caseload had sent him home each morning to his only relief--the bottle. He'd found it harder and harder to break his habit, his insatiable hunger that only blood could assuage. Even his control seemed to falter from time to time. How could he let Natalie see him like this? How could he look her in the eyes when he knew that he was letting her down? And how could he be so close to her, and not want to...?

But he needed her. He longed for her strength, her gentleness, her inspiration...her love. He reached for the phone. It was only three p.m. Maybe if she hadn't taken lunch, she would come over...

"Hello, Grace? Is Natalie...what do you mean, she's home sick? What's wrong with her? Okay, thanks."

He punched in Memory One, her home number. "Nat, it's me. I just called you at work and Grace said you're sick...what's the matter?"

"Just an upset stomach. I needed to rest."

Her voice sounded oddly distant, while his was filled with concern. "Why didn't you call me?"

She paused. "I just needed to sleep. What's up?"

He didn't like her tone. Since when had he needed an excuse to call? "I called you at work because I thought maybe you'd take your lunch hour and come here." He paused, emotion filling his voice. "I miss you, Nat. I couldn't sleep. I was thinking about you, and I really want to see you."

"So do I," she said, her tone softening.

"Hey, do you mind if I stop by on the way to work?"

"Don't you have to go in at ten?"

"I'll be late," he said. "I really need to see you."

"Me too."

His eyes brightened. "Okay. I'll be over as soon as I can. And Nat?"

"What?"

"I love you."

She'd showered and put on clean sweats and a t-shirt, trying desperately with makeup to rid herself of the tell-tale signs of the stresses she was under. When she opened the door, he met her with a broad smile and a bouquet of long-stemmed roses. But his face clouded over with worry as he saw her.

"Natalie, you look awful," he said in shock.

"Thanks a lot," she said, hurt crossing her eyes.

"Nat, I'm sorry," he said quickly, knowing he'd made a major faux pas. "I just mean I didn't realize how sick you were. Come here." His voice was tender as he pulled her into his arms, holding her close and nuzzling at her cheek. She relaxed in his embrace, her anger assuaged by the contact. "I missed you so much," he whispered in her ear, kissing her cheek.

"Me too," she replied.

He led her to the couch, handing her the roses. "These are for you. A get well present."

"Thanks," she said smiling lightly. "They're beautiful. Let me put them in water."

"No, you sit here. I'll do it."

He placed the filled vase on her table, then sat beside her. "So, how do you feel?"

"Awful," she replied, although he could already see it on her face.

He took her hand. "Nat, I have to go to work tonight, but I can come back here as soon as I'm off duty--I'll spend the day with you, and take off tomorrow night, too--"

"You don't have to do that," she said stiffly.

He looked at her strangely. She was being too aloof. "But...I want to, Nat." He paused, trying to read her eyes. "Natalie, what's the matter? And why didn't you tell me you were this sick?"

Her expression was bitter as she said evenly, "I've been like this for three weeks. If you had made any effort to see me, you would have known."

He looked down, knowing she was right, yet still surprised by the extent of her anger. "Nat, I'm sorry. Work has been really frustrating. I haven't had time for anything. And it's very difficult with you working during the day."

She heaved a sigh of resignation. "Oh, well, I guess three weeks doesn't seem like a long time to someone with eternity ahead of them."

He looked at her sharply, not believing what she was saying. "Natalie, I don't think that's fair. I know--I know I haven't been trying a lot lately--"

"You haven't tried at all!" she retorted. "When was the last time you even tried to eat food?"

He shook his head, guilt-ridden. "I don't know. A couple of months ago maybe."

"I leave food for you. I try to help. But you need to work at it, too--"

"I know, Nat. It's just been very difficult. Ever since Janette brought me over again, the urge for blood has been overpowering. I can't control it anymore. I've tried, but it's stronger than ever. She says it'll take time..."

The wrong thing to say. Obviously it was an issue he had discussed with Janette. She let it go, but he could see the hurt in her eyes. "There was a time when you would come to me if you needed help, if things were rough. And now, when we're supposed to be closer than ever...I feel as if you've been avoiding me."

He took her face in his hands. "We are closer than ever. You have to understand that if I've been avoiding you, it's only because I'm afraid to be close to you. Sometimes I want you so badly, Nat..."

She pulled away from him, as if hesitant to let her defenses down. "You controlled it before," she told him. "If you wanted to, you could. If it were that important to you--if I were that important to you--"

"How can you even question what you or becoming human mean to me?" he cried angrily. "You know better than that!"

"I thought I did," she said shakily. "But maybe it was just some phase you were going through. Janette always thought that, didn't she? Maybe having achieved it for a while was enough to satisfy your curiosity--oh, you may not want it badly enough to try seriously again for another hundred years or so." She stood angrily. "The only difference is that by then it won't be me you're doing it for, but some other mortal woman who catches your eye for a couple of years."

She turned away, but he grabbed her by the wrist, swinging her around, perhaps harder than he wanted to. "You don't know what you're talking about. You have no idea what I feel for you."

"Let go of me!" she said, pulling her arm free. "Just leave me alone..."

His eyes were ablaze, on the verge of changing as he said, "You're the one who said it would take time. That it would be difficult, but that you were willing to wait. Are you forgetting that?"

He was too angry to notice her hand go unconsciously to her abdomen as she replied, "Some things can't wait for eternity, Nick."

Her words pierced him like a stake through the heart. He couldn't believe what he was hearing. Was this his Natalie, who had been best friend, lover, fiancee, savior, inspiration, endless source of patience and love? "I don't know what's going on," he told her, fighting to regain his calm. "But when you're ready to tell me, you know where to find me." He resisted the urge to fly away, escape as if this day had never happened. Instead he found his way to the door, slamming it behind him.

Natalie's eyes filled with tears as she watched him leave. She didn't know why she'd just exploded at him so. It was as if all her frustrations had come to a head upon seeing him. She headed towards the door, ready to open it and call to him--but what would she say?

I have to get out of here... echoed in her mind. **I need time to think...decide what to do...**

In moments the suitcase had been pulled from the closet. **Don't think of him. Just pack. Jeans, tops, underwear...oh, God, Nick, why can't I tell you..? ...sneakers...socks...wallet...Nick....**

She collapsed on the couch, crying uncontrollably as Sidney jumped up to her rescue.

He didn't know what to do. But then again, neither did she.

Nick's face was like stone, his eyes glowing slightly in his anger. Schanke hadn't questioned the sunglasses, but then again, he'd simply begun to accept some of Nick's idiosyncrasies.

But Nick's mood was a little too far from the norm. "Wanna talk about it?"

"Talk about what?" he snapped.

"Oh, I don't know. NAFTA. Hockey. Or maybe the reason why you look like you could kill someone."

"If I look like that, maybe it's not a good idea to force me to talk," Nick said mirthlessly.

But Schanke was undaunted. "It's just my guess, but I'd say there's trouble in paradise. What is it? A fight with Natalie?"

Nick took a deep breath, trying to control himself, remembering that Schanke was harmless.

"Because if it is, it's totally normal. Myra and I fight all the time. Especially when she's going through that PMS thing. Women just get that way. You can't let it bother you."

He looked at Schanke curiously for a moment, hating the

idea of actually looking to Schanke for advice on his love life, but realizing that Don was, after all, married. Maybe he did have a little insight.

What am I thinking?! he reminded himself, then almost laughed at his own reaction. "Okay, Schank. Maybe you can give me a little advice."

"Shoot. Remember, us older guys have more experience in these matters."

"Uh, yeah. Anyway, Nat's just been very...upset, angry...irritable...lately."

"What is she accusing you of doing?" he asked matter-of-factly. "It's always something they're complaining about."

"I'd rather not get into it. Suffice to say, she does have some cause to be angry with me. But she just seems so...irrational." He sighed. "I don't know. Maybe it's just because she's sick. She hasn't been able to keep food down for two weeks."

"Has she been to a doctor?" Schanke asked with a strange gleam in his eye.

"She is a doctor," Nick said, not quite getting it.

"Wrong kind, buddy."

"Well, what do you mean? What do you think?" Nick asked, intrigued.

"Irritable...irrational...can't keep food down...I dunno about Natalie, but Myra was just like that once..." He looked at Nick with his eyebrows raised. "Nine months later we had Jenny."

Nick stopped short and looked at him.

"It's possible, Nick. Isn't it?"

He was about to say no, but realized that yes, maybe it was. "I...I don't think so," he stammered. "Why wouldn't she tell me?"

"There could be lots of reasons. If it's true, it's a big change. Anyway, for some reason, they always want you to guess. You're supposed to 'know their feelings'; you know, all that sensitive crap women eat up."

Nick shook his head, dismissing it with a nervous smile. "No. It can't be, Schank. Nat's not like that. She would have told me..."

"Okay, maybe I'm barking up the wrong tree," Schanke admitted. He shrugged. "Maybe it's just the flu."

But later, as Nick's shift had come to an end, he found himself on his way to see his only other real friend, one who could understand the situation far better than Schanke. For like Natalie, she was a woman. And like Nick, she was a vampire.

Janette was standing by the bar, a wine glass filled with her favorite mixture as she watched the Raven's patrons dancing the early morning hours away. She put the glass down as she saw him, and smiled. "Nicolas." She took his hand, placing a kiss on his lips. But as she separated from him, she looked at him strangely. "Something is wrong. What's troubling you?"

He sat on the bar stool. "Do you have any cow?"

She looked at him curiously, then nodded, going behind the bar to pull a bottle from the cooler. She placed the glass in front of him, watching him take a large gulp, then close his eyes as it invigorated him. He took a deep breath, then set the glass down.

"What is it, Nick?" she asked gently as she put her hand over his.

"I've had a hard time keeping away from it," he began, looking at the half-empty glass.

"You knew it would take time," she told him. "You have to be patient."

"Oh, but it's not just me that's involved this time," he responded.

She looked at him knowingly. "Natalie?"

"I know she's disappointed, frustrated...I am too. But it's more than that. She seems so distant...and angry. Almost irrational. I thought maybe it was just because she's been sick. She's got some sort of stomach virus, and can't keep any food down."

"Haven't you tried talking to her? From what I know of her, she seems quite reasonable."

He let out a deep breath, shaking his head. "Not right now. There's something definitely wrong." He forced a smile. "Schanke thinks she's pregnant. But we know that's not possible."

For a moment, Janette was at a loss for words, not quite sure what she thought--or felt--about the possibility. Finally she asked, "Well, you did use some kind of,"--she searched for the word--"...protection?"

He shook his head, surprised that she was even giving it any credence. "No. I never thought about it--"

"Of course you didn't. You've spent almost eight hundred years as a vampire. But if you're going to become human you have to think about these things. Disease, pregnancy..."

"I wasn't afraid of getting anything from Natalie..." he told her defensively.

Janette shook her head in disbelief, almost annoyance. "Nicolas, how could you live for eight hundred years--not to mention be living in the 1990's-- and be so naive, or so careless? What about you, Nick? Even if you haven't drunk human blood, and exposed yourself to human disease, you still are one of us. And you were when you made love to her. Even if she's not pregnant," she paused, seeing the concern growing in his eyes, "she could very well have been infected by your bodily fluids, just as surely as if you had given her your blood."

His concern had escalated to real fear. "What have I done?" he whispered.

"You didn't know," she told him, squeezing his hand. "There is no real way of knowing. But you must go to her and find out."

He nodded, thanking her, and kissed her lightly before her left.

Janette just watched him go, not sure what to think. This was unexplored territory for all of them. But whatever was happening to Natalie, Janette hoped that she would be all right. If not, what would happen to Nick? It just might send him irredeemably over the edge.

She had composed herself after a long nap, packed her bags and left sufficient food and water for Sidney for two days. She'd call her neighbor tomorrow to come in and check on him. Her coat was on, and she was about to go to the door when the bell rang. She opened it without asking who was there. Somehow she knew.

"Nat, I'm sorry to come so late-- He stopped abruptly as he saw the coat and suitcase. "Natalie, where are you going?"

She moved to let him in. He closed the door, taking her by the shoulders. "Natalie, please, tell me what's going on. You don't know how worried you have me."

"Nick, look, I'm sorry for the things I said before--"

"It's all right. You have a right to be upset. I have to put everything else aside, and try harder. I will. I swear to you."

"It's not just that, Nick. I just need some time to get away. To think."

"Then we'll go away together," he said, panic rising in is eyes. "Nat, we need to spend time alone together. We'll both take off from work--"

"No, Nick," she said, her voice filled with the pain of her internal struggle. She did want to be alone with him. But until she could deal herself with what was going on, she needed to be away from him. "Please, just let me go off by myself for a while."

"But where? And how long?" His voice betrayed his alarm.

"I'm not sure," she said, averting his eyes now. "I'll call you in a few days..."

"No. Nat, look at me." He brought her face up so that he could look into her eyes. "You're not yourself, Natalie. There's something wrong. And I'm afraid that maybe when we made love, there was something that passed between us that affected you. We need to talk, spend time together. I need to know you're all right."

"I'm fine," she said, pulling away from him. "I just...want to be by myself. I need to be. Now please, respect that." She turned to pick up her bag.

"Natalie," he asked, his voice softer, and filled with emotion.

"What?" She looked at him, trying to hold back her tears.

He struggled to get the words out. "Do you still love me?"

She nodded. "Of course I do," she said gently. "I just need to get away. I promise I'll call you in a couple of

days." She went to hug him, not surprised when he grasped her tightly, protectively, in his embrace. He brought his lips to hers, kissing her deeply, passionately, running his fingers through her hair, pushing himself to the very limit of his self-control. For a moment she felt weak in his arms, tempted to tell him the truth. But as she pulled away from him, she knew that her head was nowhere near clear enough. "I... have to go," she murmured.

He went to the door, looking at her one last time, his eyes filled with hurt, an image that would be imprinted on her mind. And then he was gone.

She grabbed her things, said good bye to Sidney, and left. But as she threw her bag into the back seat of her car, and started the ignition, she could not see the figure that watched her, hidden from her sight. Her tears had blinded her, and she had to call on all her reserves to calm herself before driving away.

Nick watched from above as the car drove off, contemplated following her, then thought better of it. It was almost dawn. Anyway, this was not a situation that his vampiric powers could help him resolve. If Natalie needed time and privacy, he would have to give it to her. No matter how difficult waiting would be.

He'd lived eight hundred years, and envisioned eternity. But centuries seemed to have passed more quickly than the last twenty-four hours. As dawn came up, he found himself on the couch, three empty bottles at his side. He'd called in, hoping in vain to hear from her. And after a few hours of waiting, he'd given in to his anger and despair. Without her, without her human warmth, only the blood could comfort him. And he hated himself for it. But with Natalie gone, he was too sick with worry to care. He took another gulp as he reached for the phone.

He dialed her number, cursing as he got the message. He'd hoped...

"Natalie, it's me," he said in a voice lower than his own. "If you pick up your messages, I just want you to know that I love you...and I'm thinking of you." he paused, his voice becoming choked with emotion. "I **need** you. Nat, please. Please come home. Or at least call me so I know you're all right."

He put the phone back on its receiver, then lowered the blinds as the sun began to rise. He picked up the bottle again. Yes, the oblivion that blood and sleep would bring would be his only solace.

From a hotel room in Buffalo, she picked up the phone to retrieve her messages. As she heard his voice, her heart began to ache, as tears filled her eyes. She'd tried so hard to forget about him, to clear her mind, to think about the

baby and how she would deal with what was going on. But he was a part of it, the most important part. And as much as she'd convinced herself that he didn't really care, that it was her problem alone, his voice had rid her of any doubts. And the image of his pain-filled face had haunted her...

She closed her suitcase and called for a bellhop, knowing what she had to do...

The sun was high in the sky when she reached Toronto. She entered the door code, and stepped into the elevator, her heart beating wildly. She stopped in her tracks as the door slid open to admit her.

Nick sat on the couch in his black silk pajamas, a bottle in his hand, a half dozen empty ones in front of him. He looked up at her, his amber eyes betraying a dawning hope, quickly replaced by shame. His hair was tousled, his face covered with two days' growth--but her attention was drawn at once to his fangs, extended as they had been since his binge began.

"Nick," she whispered, guilt overwhelming her. This was her fault.

He stood unsteadily to meet her, setting the bottle down, willing his features to return to normal. "Nat, you're back!" He paused, realizing the sight he must present. "I'm sorry--"

"It's okay," she said softly, wrapping her arms around him. "It's my fault. I did this to you. I'm sorry."

"No, no," he insisted, but she silenced him with her kiss. He kissed her hungrily, knowing once more that her warmth gave him more comfort than anything else could. He held her tightly as if afraid to let her go. "Natalie, thank God you're all right..."

"Nick, I'm sorry," she began, tears welling in her eyes. "I was so cruel to you. But I was afraid. And I really thought you didn't care...I didn't know how to tell you--"

"I'll try harder, Nat. From this moment on. I promise," he swore, kissing her again.

"I know you will. And I'll be here to help you." She paused. "There's just something we need to talk about. The reason I've been sick, and not thinking straight--"

"I know, my love," he broke in, taking her face in his hands. "It's not your fault. It's my blood." His face was guilt-ridden. "I'm so sorry for doing this to you. If I had known--"

"Nick--"

He looked curiously at the slight smile that had crossed her lips as she insisted, "I'm trying to tell you something."

"What is it?" he asked tenderly, a bit curiously.

She took a deep breath. "I'm pregnant, Nick. We're going to have a baby."

For a moment he wasn't sure he had heard her correctly; his mind had been functioning on a totally different

wavelength, concerned only with how he might have affected her with his blood. But now...

"What did you say?" he whispered, needing to hear it again.

She smiled at his utter shock. "We're going to have a baby," she repeated.

Relief flooded her as his face filled with joy. "I can't believe it. Oh, Nat..." He kissed her again, then held her close. "Are you sure?" he asked, looking at her with excitement.

"Yes," she said, smiling broadly for the first time in a long time. "Absolutely sure. In six months, you're going to be a daddy."

"Nat, this is incredible," he said as he led her to the couch. "How is this possible?"

"You mean to say that at your age you still don't know?" she teased him.

He reached up to caress her cheek. "Of course I know. I just didn't think--" He stopped midsentence, just looking at her, his face a mixture of incredulity and emotion. "I love you," he whispered, drawing her into his arms.

For a long while they sat together in each other's embrace, drinking in the pure bliss of the moment. Finally, once the realization had sunken in, he asked, "Have you been to a doctor? Is everything all right?"

Her smile faded. "No, I haven't gone. I've been taking al my prenatal vitamins, and doing everything the books say--"

"It's not the same. You should see an obstetrician."

"I know I should, but I was afraid that if there's anything unusual--how could I explain it?"

His face clouded over with concern. "I know."

"What you said before about being infected by your blood...You're right, we have to know. But I'll have to run tests myself."

"I just wish you could see a doctor. Nat, I'm worried about you. Not being able to eat..."

"It could all be normal," she told him, then paused. "And if it's not--I don't think there's anything a human doctor could do for me anyway."

He knew it was true, and it filled him with guilt. "Natalie, I'm sorry."

"Don't be sorry," she pleaded him. "I'm not. Let's just be happy about this."

"You don't know how happy I am," he told her as he gathered her into his arms again. He ran his hands through her hair, tousling it, playing with it. "I love you," he whispered, kissing her. His hand found her abdomen, resting there in wonder. "I love you both," he said softly.

Two weeks later, Natalie sat at work, trying to concentrate on the report in front of her. Andrew had

performed the autopsy, and she was trying desperately to find a tie-in between this victim and the last. She laid the papers down as Nick strode in, his smiling face full of life.

He plopped a package in front of her.

"What's this?" she asked, standing to greet him.

"A milkshake. Heavy on the milk." He kissed her, holding her a long moment as she rested wearily against him. "Any chance you can get off work early?"

"No, I really have to finish going over these," she replied, separating from him. "I really hate it when I haven't done the procedure myself--I always worry that they forgot something."

"So why didn't you?" he asked curiously. "The Owens case is fairly big."

She shrugged. "I don't know. I just felt a little queasy all day."

"Well, drink this." He opened the shake.

"Ugh, I don't think--"

"Drink it," he ordered.

She gave him a look, but complied, taking a few sips then setting it down. "I'll finish it. Don't worry."

"You'd better," he warned. He pulled the car keys from his pocket, handing them to her. "I'll see you at home. I'll have breakfast waiting for you." He gave her a kiss, lingering a moment, and was gone.

Natalie picked up the shake, forcing half of it down before nausea overtook her once more. She willed the time to pass quickly, so she could go home--to **their home.**

When Nick had learned of her condition, he'd convinced her at once to move in with him, insisting that he wanted to be there for her every moment possible. She hadn't argued. She **needed** to be with him, just as much as he needed her there. So they'd gone to her apartment to collect Sidney and most of her things, and, aside from their time at work, they hadn't been apart since. Being together had brought them both strength, and she'd even found that with his concern and coaxing she'd been able to eat. She'd always thought of herself as independent, but the last two weeks had proved to her how truly dependent on him she'd become. And it frightened her.

Because as much as he was trying now, he still hadn't come over. And until he did, he wouldn't be hers completely. She found her mind wandering back to that day over three months ago, that beautiful day in that sun, that wonderful morning when they'd become one...

...and she ached for him.

She willed herself back to the present, and to her work.

Cleaning the cat litter was far from his favorite job, but it was one of those things he knew he had to do while Natalie was pregnant. He finished, washed his hands, fed

Sidney, then opened the refrigerator, looking over its contents. The bottles of blood sat side by side with milk, juice, eggs, vegetables, cheese, meat... He reached for a bottle, then held himself back, opting for some meat instead. He threw a patty in the frying pan, browning it enough to make it healthy...

He took a bite, forcing himself to concentrate more on the meat than the precious red juice within. He swallowed, took a deep breath, then took another bite. So far, so good.

Having Natalie at his side had been the impetus he'd needed to start again. For though he still needed some blood to sustain him, he was well on his way to recovery, eating more food each day. And there was a goal. He would walk beside her in the daylight again. And together, they would raise their child in the sunlight.

The elevator door slid open, bringing him from his reverie. Too early to be Natalie. He looked up in surprise to see Janette.

"Nicolas."

He was about to suggest she ring the doorbell next time, but the concern in her eyes set all else aside.

"Janette. What's wrong?" he asked going over to her.

"We need to talk." She kissed him lightly on the lips, her eyes darting about. "Are we alone?"

"Yes, Natalie won't be back for an hour."

She looked at him. "May I have something to drink?"

"Sure." He reached for one of the bottles, uncorking it with his teeth, trying not to whiff its aroma as he poured her a glass. "Sorry it's not your type," he said with a slight twinkle in his eye.

She raised her eyebrow at the half-eaten hamburger, then accepted the drink gladly, not even complaining that it wasn't human. As soon as she'd taken a few sips, her calm demeanor seemed to return. She set her glass down. "Nick, some...of our kind, that I'd never seen before, were at the Raven, asking questions."

"About what?"

"You, Nicolas. Natalie. And," she paused, looking into his eyes, "a baby. Is it true? Is she really with child?"

Pride still peeked through his concern. "Yes," he told her. "I'm sorry I haven't had a chance to tell you. I found out two weeks ago, that night we last spoke. I've just been with her every moment, I haven't had time to stop by."

Janette's expression was one of disbelief, although no one but Nick would have noted the touch of envy. "Nicolas, this is...incredible."

"I know," he said, smiling broadly. "I still have a hard time believing it myself."

"So, my sweet Nicolas," she said, touching his cheek. "You trade one form of immortality for another."

"I always wanted to be a father. You know that," he replied, putting his hand over hers.

"Yes, we both were enchanted with the thought of children not so long ago," she replied softly. "Don't you remember?"

They watched Daniel playing with his new toy truck, oblivious of the horrors of the so-called War to end all wars.

"He's so precious, Nicolas," she said from behind him, her body molding against his. "Don't you wish that we too could have children?" she whispered in his ear.

"Yes," he said absently, caressing the arms that had wrapped around his waist. "But we can't, can we?"

"Daniel could be ours."

He turned to face her, taking her into his arms. He knew how she really did long for a child, just as he did. "But he's not ours, Janette," he whispered as he kissed her. "Nor LaCroix's. He's not ours to keep..."

"I remember," he said quietly, not wanting to think of what had happened to Daniel. He could tell by the sadness in her eyes that she was remembering too. He took her into his arms, hugging her. "There was nothing we could do."

"You're right. That's why all the questions being asked tonight...just reminded me."

"Of Daniel?"

She nodded. "And of Stavros. It was him, Nick. I feel it. He knows about this baby."

She could feel him tense as the little color in his face was drained. "Janette, you don't think he wants Natalie...the baby..."

"All I know was that they were asking questions: are you still one of us; is the child really yours; has she been brought over." She sighed. "That's all. I wish there was more. But I thought you should know."

"Thank you," he said with real emotion, knowing that she could be endangering herself by her loyalty to him. He kissed her warmly before separating from her.

But as his lips came from hers, the unmistakable sound of the elevator door sliding open told him that they were no longer alone. He turned quickly to see Natalie standing there.

Watching them.

Her eyes were filled with anger and hurt. Nick went to her quickly, realizing what it must have looked like. But she turned away from him, heading up the stairs.

"Natalie!"

Janette eyes opened wide as she watched Natalie retreat. "I'm sorry, Nicolas. Do you want me to talk to her, explain--"

"No. I don't want her to know about Stavros. I don't want to upset her--"

"I think it's a little late for that," she commented. "I'd better go."

"Thank you," he said, squeezing her hand. "For everything."

He ran up the stairs as she left, finding Natalie sitting on the bed, her eyes red with tears.

"Natalie, I know what you must think--"

"Do you?" she asked bitterly, standing to face him. "You're making a fool of me, Nick. We're engaged, I'm carrying your baby, I've just moved in here with you--and I come home to find **her** here, kissing you in our own home!"

"Nat, it was innocent. Just a friendly kiss."

"Friendly?!" she asked fuming. "I don't kiss **my** friends like that!"

"You know what she is to me," he said, putting his hands on her shoulders. "We've been friends for centuries. And now that she brought me over--she's like a sister, or mother--"

"Listen to yourself trying to justify it!" she cried.

"I'm not--"

"Because you can't! And you can't have us both, Nick. I thought you'd made your choice!"

"Nat, I **have** made my choice," he insisted, his blue eyes sincere. "She just came here to talk to me. I was kissing her good bye. That's all."

He could see in her eyes that she wanted to believe him.

"Janette and I have been kissing like that for centuries. But I've already told you a thousand times that it doesn't mean anything. There's nothing more between us. Just the remnants of a very old passion, and a friendship that's a little stronger now because she brought me back over, and saved my life. You said you understood that."

"The bond you have with her, yes. But the physical closeness..." Her anger had abated, replaced by distress. "It just hurts me, Nick. Can't you understand that?"

"Of course I do," he whispered, holding her against him. "I'm sorry, my love. I'm sorry. I promise I'll talk to her about it. And I won't do anything anymore that might hurt you." He kissed her deeply, with more passion than she could ever have witnessed between him and Janette. "I love you," he said softly, kissing her again.

"Nick..." she said as they dropped down to the bed. "Please... I need you..." She ran her fingers through his hair, caressing him as his lips moved down her neck. But even as she felt his own excitement building with hers, she could feel his entire body stiffen as he pulled abruptly away from her.

"No..." he said as his head came up. And his pain-filled eyes were glowing bright amber. "Natalie, I can't...control it. I want you too badly..."

"Then fight it," she pleaded, reaching out to him. "Please, Nick. I'm not afraid..."

"But I am," he told her, rising to sit on the bed. He looked down at her in anguish. "I won't take a chance of hurting you or the baby, Nat. I can't." He took her hand, kissing it, holding it against the coolness of his cheek, blood tears falling from his still-yellow eyes. "I need to go downstairs for a while," he said.

"Nick, please," she entreated him, rising to sit next to him, putting her face against his. "Just hold me. Please."

"Not right now," he said in a hoarse whisper. "I'm sorry..." And he pulled himself away, rushing from the room in fear of her life.

And downstairs, he reached for the glass Janette had set down, drinking with as voracious a hunger as he had ever experienced, hating himself for it, knowing damn well that it was with Natalie he wanted to be, holding her, loving her. And it was the very blood that was satisfying him now that was keeping him from her. He threw the glass into the sink, breaking it into a dozen pieces. He wanted the blood...he wanted Natalie...he could allow himself neither. He threw himself on the couch, closing his eyes, trying to escape himself in sleep, escape the conflicting urges that battled within him...

...and in his bedroom, Natalie heard the glass break, could see him in her mind's eye...wanted to go to him...but knew that he wouldn't want her to. She closed her eyes, forcing herself to sleep...

...but hours later she still lay awake. She tip-toed quietly down the stairs, watching him for a moment as he slept peacefully on the couch. She would let him enjoy his peace, knowing how rare it was for him. She went to the kitchen, trying in the dim light to find something to assuage the hunger that had made her stomach ache, but that wouldn't make her nauseous again. She decided on an apple, grabbing a paring knife to peel it.

"Ow!" She glanced at Nick to make sure she hadn't awoken him, then turned to see the finger that she'd accidentally slit open. Instinctively, she brought her finger to her mouth, licking the blood away...

...and suddenly dizziness overtook her, nearly making her fall. She steadied herself, found her way to the armchair, and sat down, waiting for her head to clear. She realized that her cut still stung, and once more, she brought it to her mouth...but this time, as the dizziness overwhelmed her, she realized it was much more. An exhilaration, an assuaging of that hunger that she'd tried to appease, without any of the accompanying nausea that had plagued her for weeks. And as she looked at Nick's sleeping body, suddenly she was afraid. **My God, what's happening to me?**

She could not see her own eyes that had begun to glow a pale amber. If she had, then she would have truly been afraid.

Daniel's eyes were glowing bright yellow, his fangs extended as he sated his thirst with the blood LaCroix had just given him. Nick watched him in horror, his grief overwhelming him. Why hadn't Daniel gotten away?

Janette placed her hand lightly on his arm. "Now he can stay with us, Nicolas. Our child..."

He glared at her. "How long will he want to remain a

child, Janette? What happens when his mind matures, and his body does not? Will he still look on us so fondly? Will he still call you "Princess", or will he look on you, on all of us, as the monsters we are?"

Janette was silent, contemplating what he had said. But LaCroix, overhearing, turned to her. "Pay no mind to Nicholas, Janette. I've given you the child you always wanted..."

Nick awoke abruptly, wishing he could not remember the dream, but glad it had ended where it did. Why was this plaguing him now?

He sat up, surprised to see Natalie asleep on the armchair. Had she come to be with him? Gingerly, he lifted her into his arms, careful not to wake her, carrying her upstairs, and laying her gently on the bed. He observed her for a long moment, then went to shower.

She awoke, disoriented. How had she gotten here?

"I carried you up," he explained to the question in her eyes. As her vision focused, she saw that he had showered, changed, and was carrying a tray of food. "Breakfast in bed," he told her.

"I'm not hungry," she murmured.

"But the baby is," he reminded her as he sat across from her. "Here, I brought for me, too. And if I can eat this stuff, then certainly you can."

She looked down at the bacon and eggs, toast, juice, and milk, with no appetite whatsoever. And suddenly last night came back to her. It was a dream. It had to be. A nightmare. To disprove it all, she took a healthy gulp of orange juice...

...and felt ill.

"Come on, Nat. Please. Look, it's easy." He brought milk up to his lips, tasted it, swallowed it, and smiled. He handed it to her. "Come on. Now you."

To satisfy him, and for the sake of the baby, she ate as much as she felt she could keep down, then pushed it away. "Please, no more," she said. And as she wiped her lips with a napkin, then placed it on the tray, she noticed it. The cut, just beginning to heal. She gasped slightly.

"What is it?" he asked with concern.

"Nothing. I'm okay. I just think...I ought to stay home tonight. I didn't sleep very well."

"Do you want me to stay with you?" he asked as he set the tray aside. "I will if you want."

She shook her head, forcing a smile. "No, it's okay. Save your time off for when the baby's born."

"Okay." He kissed her on the lips, pushing himself to his limit in his need to comfort her. "I'll be home in a few hours. Call me if you need me."

"Look, I know you're angry because I went to talk to her, but I **had** to. I don't want her coming between us--"

"Natalie, as far as I'm concerned, nothing can come between us. But that's a different issue entirely." He paused, looking into her eyes, trying to compose himself. "I want to know about the blood."

"I don't know what you're talking about," she lied, pulling away from him. She couldn't deny it to his face. She walked into the kitchen, looking for...something, some relief.

"Nat, please," he said, coming up behind her, placing his hands gently on her shoulders. "Tell me the truth. Janette saw you drink blood..."

She turned sharply to face him. "Okay. So I did. Without realizing it, but yes, I did. And it made me feel good, healthy, for the first time in months! So why not?" she cried. She opened the refrigerator, pulling out a bottle of his own supply. "Besides, maybe after all is said and done, **this** is the only way that I can really have you!"

With that she tore out the cork, raising the bottle to her lips...

He grabbed it from her, smashing it to the floor. Natalie fell into his arms, crying uncontrollably. "It's okay," he said tenderly, kissing her on the forehead.

"Please, Nick," she sobbed. "I want it. I need it...I want to be like you...I want you to love me, have the same passion for me that you do for Janette..."

"I love you," he told her, holding her tightly. "And my passion for you, my desire for you is immeasurable. Don't you see that I'm just afraid to get close to you again until I'm fully human?"

"You wouldn't be afraid if I were like you," she said, clinging to him. "Please, Nick..."

"Nat, you're not thinking straight," he said, hugging her close. "It's my blood...maybe even the baby...It's given you the desire for blood...you're too confused to even realize what you're saying..."

But as she raised her head to look at him, he gasped to see that her eyes had turned a bright amber. "Please, Nick," she beseeched him. "I'm so thirsty. Help me feel better. Please..."

"No, my love, no," he said tenderly as his own eyes filled with blood tears. What had he done to her? Anguish consumed him as he held her weak, whimpering form in the protection of his loving embrace. Finally, he lifted her up into his arms, carrying her upstairs to the bed.

He sat with her for a long while until he was sure she was asleep, then went downstairs to do what was long overdue. One at a time, he emptied the bottles of cow's blood. It was something he should have done for himself. Now he would do it for her.

She awoke to find herself alone in bed. "Nick?"

chosen a path that has nothing to do with me, or what we once had. He loves you, and the child you're carrying. Why should an occasional kiss or embrace between old friends bother you so?"

Natalie was searching for an answer when the bouncer tapped on Janette's shoulder. He whispered something to her, and she said, "They need me for a moment. Please, relax, have something to drink, and we'll talk some more."

Natalie watched her go, her thoughts racing. Janette did make perfect sense, and seemed genuine. Then why **did** it bother her so? Was it her own insecurity? Her own frustration at wanting to be as intimate with him as they once were, and his inability to do so? With a shaking hand she picked up a glass and began to drink absently...

Out of the corner of her eye, Janette watched Natalie as the bouncer spoke to her. Uncontrollably, she did a double take...were her eyes playing tricks on her, **or was Natalie drinking blood?!**

...and suddenly that exhilaration overtook her once more, that unquenchable thirst that only could only be satisfied by...

She looked at the glass in horror, wiping her lips, looking down at the blood on her fingers. In panic she realized that the cranberry juice still lay untouched in front of her. She had taken Janette's glass! She dropped it to the floor in terror, in disgust, the crash unheard above the loud dance music. I **have to get out of here...** She grabbed her purse, running away, trying to deny what she had done.

She was gone when Janette returned, picked up the remaining glass and sniffed. In shock she set it down, then noticed the broken glass at her feet. **Her** glass.

Without hesitation, she reached for the phone. Nick's voice was almost frantic with worry as he picked up on the first ring.

"Nicolas, we have a problem. A very big problem."

Natalie's heart was beating wildly as she entered the apartment, throwing her bag on the floor. She looked up in surprise to see Nick standing, waiting for her. His blue eyes were ablaze with anger.

"You're supposed to be at work," she said, averting his gaze.

"I came home early when you didn't answer the phone." He came up to her, taking her by the shoulders, forcing her to look at him. "Why did you go there, Nat? You don't know how dangerous it could have been!"

At once it dawned on her. "Oh, I see. Your friend called, didn't she?"

"She's worried about you, as I am--"

But a few hours later, when he called to check in on her, she was gone. And immediately his thoughts began to race with possibilities he didn't even want to acknowledge. He told Stonetree he'd have to leave early, and went home to find the loft empty, save for Sidney. Panic began to set in, but he resisted the call of the bottles in the refrigerator...

As Natalie stepped into the Raven, she knew immediately she was not in her element. She felt uncomfortable in the blouse and knee-length skirt that had just begin to fit too snugly, compared to the almost bulimic young women in their twenties wearing every mixture of black lace and leather. But she'd come here for a purpose, and she strode towards the bar, looking for Janette.

There she was. Natalie hated the way she looked, so young despite her ancient soul, eternally perfect in her basic black minidress, low-cut to reveal the slim white neck from which, she knew, Nick had fed so many times. Janette looked up in surprise as Natalie approached her. Was that concern crossing her eyes? Or amusement? She had to know how Natalie felt, especially after last night.

"Natalie. What brings you here? Are you alone?"

"Yes. And I need to talk to you," she said, measuring her words.

"Of course," she said pleasantly, her curiosity rising. "Can I offer you a drink?"

"No, thank you. I can't drink alcohol right now."

Janette smiled sweetly. "Yes, I hear congratulations are in order." As Natalie nodded her thanks, Janette turned to the bartender. "A glass of my usual, and some plain cranberry juice for my friend."

Natalie started at her use of the word friend. Janette couldn't help but notice. "I am your friend, Natalie. Nicolas loves you. How could we not be friends?"

Natalie tried to choose her words carefully. "Janette, I'm grateful for everything you did for Nick--and for me. And I know your friendship with him runs very deep--"

"There is no deeper bond than that of blood, Natalie," Janette told her as she raised her own glass. "My connection to Nick is an eternal one. It won't go away."

Her tone was matter-of-fact, but her words stinging.

"I know all that," Natalie told her. "But can't you respect what I have with him? Our relationship? Our baby?"

"I **do** respect that," Janette replied. "Because it's what he wants--"

"Then why can't you keep your hands off of him?" she said evenly, with anger raging in her eyes.

"Is that what's bothering you, Natalie? A kiss?"

"It's more than that. You don't seem to realize, things are different now."

Janette moved closer to her, as if about to tell an intimate secret. "Natalie, Nicolas has made his choice. He's

In moments he was at her side, smiling at her with concern in his blue eyes. She reached out to him, and he lay beside her, drawing her close. She rested her head against his bare chest where his black robe had fallen open. He reached up to her hair, his flowing sleeve brushing against her skin. "It's okay, Nat. You're all right now."

"What's wrong with me, Nick?" she asked weakly. She looked up at him, fear in her normally bold blue eyes. "What's happening to me?"

"I'm not sure," he admitted, unable to hide his own worry. "Nat, I spoke to Janette about it...she's the only one I thought might know--"

"It's okay," she said, assuring him there was no need to explain. "Does she have any theories? Is it the baby?"

He shook his head. "No. Neither of us thinks so. The baby would only have my DNA."

"And your condition isn't genetic," she finished, the doctor in her taking over. "So it's me. The blood I drank--"

"No, Nat." He refused to let her accept the guilt that was his alone. "It's me. When we made love, whatever was dormant in my blood, in my bodily fluids, was passed to you."

"So you...brought me over? It can't be. I've been in the sunlight--"

He shook his head. "No. Thank God. But it's lying dormant in your blood, as it was in mine that day. That's why you couldn't eat food."

"And drinking the blood brought it out."

He nodded. "Natalie, I'm so sorry..." he said, caressing her cheek.

"You had no way of knowing," she told him. "What we have to do now, is figure out how this is going to affect the baby. The fetus doesn't share blood with the mother, so its blood hasn't been infected."

"No. I didn't think so. If a fetus were brought over, it couldn't develop."

"But it does take in nourishment from me," she said.

"Which is why the most important thing for you to do is eat real food, and stay away from the blood."

"Easier said than done." She paused. "But then you know that." She reached up to touch his face, as she said tenderly, "For the first time, I think I really understand how hard it's been for you."

"That's why I'm going to help you--just as you've helped me. All the blood in the house if gone. There's nothing left but food."

She looked at him in alarm. "How will I go to work? I deal with blood all day." She thought a moment. "That must be why I was getting so dizzy--"

"You're not going back to work," he told her. "Not right away, anyway. Neither am I. I told Stonetree that you're having complications with your pregnancy, and I'd need to stay home to take care of you." He smiled. "Which is exactly what I'm going to do."

She reached up to kiss him, relishing his touch, his love and attention being what she needed most of all right now. "Nick, if I can stay away from the blood--"

"The vampirism should grow weaker and weaker. Maybe disappear completely. We don't know. But at least, the baby should be safe."

"There's no guarantee, is there?" she asked, tears filling her eyes.

"No, Nat. Not for any of us. But we have to try. If you drink blood, you'll come over. And the baby..."

His voice trailed off. He couldn't say it. But they both knew that there was more at stake than Natalie's coming over.

For if she did, the baby would undoubtedly die.

He pulled her closer, holding her tightly. "We'll do it, Nat," he whispered in her ear. "We'll do it together."

And they did. For the next eight weeks, they spent every moment together, living their lives to the fullest each night, sleeping in one another's arms each day. It became a game, first coaxing each other to eat, and then finding a new restaurant each night to try every type cuisine imaginable. They also took time to do all the things that their work schedules had rarely permitted--movies, the theatre, baseball games, museums, evening walks through the park, concerts...totally normal activities that Nick had never had someone with whom to share.

The effects on both of them were outstanding. Nick's vampiric abilities had dwindled down almost to where they'd been five months ago, as his skin had warmed, and his complexion had turned a healthy peach. And Natalie was perfectly radiant, bursting with good health, and a strong apetite that had spurred the baby's growth. According to the books, her weight gain was perfect, and Nick delighted in feeling the growing bulge where their baby continued to kick, anxious to join them in the mortal world.

But most satisfying to Nick was seeing Natalie truly happy, at ease with herself and their life together. Her sense of humor had returned, along with the beautiful smile that never ceased to captivate him. It was so good to see her smile, hear her laugh again. And as they planned for the future, their concerns of the past few months seemed to disappear...

It was a warm August evening, and when Natalie awoke, she reached over to find only Sidney sleeping with her. She sat up in bed, looked on his pillow to find a note: "Went shopping. Be back soon. Love, Nick." She lay back down to wait for him, resting her hand on her abdomen, smiling as she felt the baby kick. "Good morning to you, too," she said softly.

She didn't wait long. In minutes she heard the door slide open, and his familiar step as he ran up the stairs. He peeked into the bedroom, holding something behind his back. He smiled as he saw her watching him. "Good, you're awake."

"And where have you been at the crack of...uh, dusk?" she asked, struggling to lift herself up to a sitting position.

He sat across from her, then brought forward the package he'd been hiding. "Buying these," he said, handing her three dozen long-stemmed roses.

"Nick, they're beautiful! But what's the occasion?"

He smiled mischievously. "I know I forgot last year, so I wanted to make up for it today. Happy Birthday, Nat."

Her eyes opened wide. "August 15th! I lost track of the days. I can't believe you remembered!" She laced her arms around his neck, accepting his kiss. "Thank you," she said, smiling.

"We've got dinner reservations in two hours. Do you want your present now, or later?"

"Well, since you brought it up, now you have to give it to me," she teased.

"Okay. Here it is." From his inside jacket pocket he pulled an oblong box, delicately wrapped in gold metallic paper. He handed it to her, then remembering, pulled the card from another pocket. "This goes with it."

She opened the card first; it was one of Hallmark's mushier variety, which said, "Happy Birthday to My Wife." She looked up at him, and his eyes were serious as he said, "I know we're waiting until we can do it the right way, in a church, but it seemed appropriate. That's how I think of you." She smiled, the warmth in her eyes telling him that she understood. When she had read the inside, he said, "Look--I even signed "LOVE, Nick" this time..."

She laughed. "Yeah, it sure beats "with affection", like last year's card."

"Well, I still don't think it was that bad. I meant with a **lot** of affection. I just couldn't get that four letter L-word out."

She laughed. Last year seemed centuries away...She began to unwrap the package.

"I hope you like it," he said expectantly.

Her mouth dropped open as she lifted the cover on the box to expose an exquisite diamond heart necklace. Probably an inch and a half in diameter, the heart itself was made up of twelve diamonds, each at least a half-karat in size. It sat on a rich gold chain, thicker than any Natalie had ever seen. "Nick, it's breathtaking," she said softly. "I love it!" She threw her arms around him again, kissing him, then resting against his chest.

He smiled, pleased that he'd made the right choice.

"I just want this birthday to be better than the last," he said as he held her close. For a moment his expression grew dark as he thought of how he had almost lost her just a year ago.

"How could it not be better?" she asked, oblivious to his thoughts. "I've got you, and in four months we're going to have a baby..." She separated from him, taking his hand to lay on her abdomen. "It's kicking now. See?"

He held his hand there in absolute awe until the child within began to calm down. "He certainly is anxious to come out," he commented.

"Yes, **she** is," Natalie replied with a grin, then looked at him seriously. "You know, maybe since everything seems to be going okay, I can finally go to a doctor--at least get a sonorgram--"

"That's an excellent idea," he told her, relieved that she would finally relent to going. "Why don't you try to get someone with evening hours so I can go with you--"

"In the summer time? Sorry, but I think coroners are the only doctors that work after sundown." At the disappointment on his face, she added, "Okay, I'll try. Maybe in some hospital..."

"Thanks. I just want to be involved in every aspect."

"Good. I'll look into LaMaze classes so you can know what to do in the delivery room."

"Hey, I was a doctor in another life, you know."

She laughed. "A lot's changed in a hundred years."

"Not how babies are born," he replied dryly. He took the necklace out of the box. "Come on. Let me put this on for you."

He helped her out of bed, then stood behind her in front of the mirror, fastening the clasp.

"It looks beautiful," she said, admiring her gift.

Hew wrapped his arms around her waist, kissing her on the neck. "So do you." He held her a moment, looking at their reflection, then said. "Why don't you get ready now? We've got a table at the most exclusive restaurant in Toronto. I want this to be the best birthday you've ever had."

The dinner had been wonderful: shrimp cocktail, an asparagus salad, and filet mignon, rare for Nick, and well-done for Natalie. They sat now contemplating the dessert menu. "I don't know. I'm really full..." she began, although the pecan pie did look tempting...

He looked at her and smiled. She looked so lovely in the pale pink dress, her light brown hair flowing freely about her shoulders. It was true what they said about pregnancy enhancing a woman's beauty...

Suddenly, Nick felt a cold chill run down his spine. Natalie must have sensed him tense, for she asked, "What's the matter?"

How could he explain what he felt? A presence, an ancient One, watching him, closing in...

The figure had made his way to their corner table noiselessly. Nick looked up with a start, the blood draining from his face. Natalie followed his gaze to see a tall

dark-haired man with piercing brown eyes that seemed to smile at Nick's reaction.

"Hello, Nicholas. It's been a long time."

"Stavros," he said, instinctively rising.

The dark-haired man that stood before them had the presence of an ancient soul, exuding a power that could only belong to a vampire who had lived through millennia. His dark eyes pierced through Nick and Janette, making them feel almost weak in his company. Even LaCroix seemed shaken to see him, as if his own reign of power were threatened by this Elder among their kind...

"You're looking well, Nicholas. Humanity seems to agree with you." He turned to Natalie. "And this must be your fiancee," he said as if enchanted by the notion.

Nick broke into a cold sweat, glad that he had begun to perspire as humans do, for it was far less obvious than blood. "This is Natalie," he managed, hating being forced into the introduction. "Nat, this is Stavros...an old friend."

He glanced at Stavros, who didn't seem to mind the introduction, nodding his approval of Nick's adherence to the Code. "Pleased to meet you, Natalie."

Natalie responded in kind, as his cold handshake reaffirmed what she'd already guessed him to be. She glanced at Nick, feeling his discomfort, but forcing a smile.

"Nat, Stavros and I have some things to discuss--" he said in a tone that told her that it had to be private.

"I was just going to freshen up," she supplied quickly. "Will you excuse me?"

"Certainly, my dear. Although I look forward to getting to know Nicholas' true love." His smile was charming and unnerving at once. With a glace at Nick, she picked up her purse and left the table.

Stavros, ever the gentleman, had asked a waiter to bring over another chair, while he left the lady's vacant for her return. He sat down, motioning for Nicholas to do the same.

"So, Nicholas, when and where was it last?"

"England. 1915," Nick said needlessly. Stavros knew damn well when it had been. "Is Daniel well?"

"He's become quite powerful actually, under our tutelage," he replied.

"But is he happy?"

Stavros raised an eyebrow at the question, so human in nature, but responded honestly. "As happy as a creature almost 90 years old can be in the body of a child."

"LaCroix's great experiment," Nick said disdainfully.

"You know I've never liked LaCroix much," Stavros intimated. "But I do like you, Nicholas. You have a spirit I admire. That is why I came personally to speak with you."

Nick was silent, knowing what was coming.

"It's of this new experiment we must speak," Stavros told him plainly.

"There's no experiment here, Stavros. Just an unborn child."

Stavros looked at him with interest. "You know for a fact the child is yours?"

Had he been able to lie, it might have made things easier. But Stavros would know. "Yes, of course it is."

"And it was conceived in a mortal union?"

"Yes."

"No sharing of blood?"

"No."

"And the woman--you've not brought her over to be one of us?"

"I would rather die than do that," he replied.

Stavros paused, impressed by the apparent intensity of Nick's emotions. "I know, of course, of what happened between you and LaCroix. It was Janette who brought you over again. Was the child conceived before this?"

Nick nodded. "I was, as far as I knew, human."

"Yet it was dormant within you, wasn't it, Nicholas?"

Nick hesitated, not liking where the conversation was going. But he knew he had to answer. "Yes. I just didn't know it at the time."

"And has Natalie suffered ill affects of her union with you?"

"She did. She was very sick. But she's fine, now. Perfectly normal," he added. "So is the baby."

"Come, Nicholas. Do you really know that for a fact? Can any of us know?"

Nick was silent, trying to obscure the fear rising within him.

"You know why I've come, Nicholas."

"No, I don't. There's no need for you here. There's nothing unusual about this--"

"Ah, but there is. The first child conceived between mortal and vampire--"

"I was human," Nick insisted, perhaps a little too vehemently for Stavros' liking.

"Not completely," Stavros reminded him. He paused, studying the dread in Nick's eyes, then said what he must.

"I've come to take her, Nicholas."

"No!" Nick nearly cried in terror, as loudly as he could in a public place. Damn Stavros for choosing to confront him here!

"That's precisely why I did choose it, Nicholas. No scene. No argument. This is what must be done."

"I won't let you," Nick said boldly, though both men knew there was nothing he could do to prevent it.

"She'll be unharmed, Nicholas," he promised. "I'm taking her back to our headquarters in Paris, where she'll be under observation until the child is born--"

"And then what? Are you saying you mean to let her live after she's seen you all?" he challenged. "The Enforcers--"

"--do my bidding," Stavros told him. "Natalie is not a danger to us. She has known of you for three years, and said nothing. I will allow her to live."

At the look of surprise on Nick's face, he explained, "Yes, we have been observing you both for a very long time. You've never been out of our sight. Especially since the child was conceived."

Nick's heart dropped as he cursed himself for having been lulled into a false sense of security.

"In any case, Nicholas, it's the baby we're really interested in."

The rage began to grow within him. "You can't take our child!" he sputtered in a hushed whisper.

"We can do whatever we want, Nicholas," Stavros told him, his own anger crossing his dark eyes. "I speak to you only out of courtesy, because of the respect I hold for you. I could have sent the Enforcers to whisk her away the moment we heard of her pregnancy--"

"Stavros, please," Nick appealed, trying to force down his panic. "Believe me when I say that the child will be human. In which case, it would be of no interest to you, right?"

Stavros considered it a moment, then replied, "Correct."

"Well, contemplate this. Natalie is in a very precarious condition. If you were to take her from me, bring her to a strange place where a group of vampires were observing her, examining her, holding her hostage, as it were...the results could be devastating! The stress alone could cause her to miscarry."

"It's a risk," Stavros admitted. "But I see no other alternative."

"You can't risk her life, the life of our child, just because it's the most convenient way to handle the situation!" Nick told him.

"You have a suggestion?"

"Yes. Let her stay with me. Let me care for her, as I have been. And when the time comes, you can send someone to see that the child is human, and of no use to you--"

"If it is not, we will take it," he warned.

"It will be," Nick said with certainty. "Please, Stavros," he implored. "Don't needlessly destroy all that I have. Don't destroy Natalie by putting her through that ordeal..."

Stavros pondered his words for a long moment, until finally nodding his head. "All right, Nicholas. We'll do it your way. But there will be a restriction."

"Anything," Nick said, breathing a deep sigh of relief.

"She must not go to a doctor, or hospital, even to give birth." At Nick's look of protest, he explained, "This is my only mandate. For if the child is born vampiric, all those humans who witness the birth, with the exception of his mother, will be destroyed. It is the Code."

Nick nodded his assent.

"When the time comes, we will send an observer to verify it the child is human or not. Don't worry. I will choose someone who will not frighten her."

"Thank you," Nick said softly, understanding the concession this Elder was making for him.

At that moment, Natalie returned, hesitating to see if their business had concluded. "It's okay, Nat," he told her. "Come sit down." He rose to pull out her chair, glancing at Stavros as the Elder seemed to stare in wonder at Natalie and the bulge where their child lay nestled.

"When is your baby due?" he asked pleasantly.

"December 15th," she replied, a little nervous at the way he was gazing at her, no, through her.

"We should drink a toast to your child," he said, reaching into his cloak. The bottle he pulled out was unmistakably filled with the thick red liquid that Nick and Natalie had pointedly avoided for the last two months.

He's testing me, Nick thought to himself.

As if in answer, Stavros filled a wine glass, offering it to him.

"No, thank you," Nick told him, motioning to his own glass. "I think I'll stick to the White Zinfandel."

"Have it your way," Stavros replied, seemingly unperturbed. But as he turned to Natalie, his eyes sparked with real interest. "Would you like some?"

Nick held his breath as Natalie hesitated, the sight and aroma of the blood jarring her. But she knew somehow how important it was for her to force a smile and say, "No, thanks. Never touch the stuff."

Stavros withdrew, but Nick knew that he had noticed Natalie's initial reaction. And it filled him with dread to imagine what the Elder must be thinking...

"Well, then, I'll leave you two to your dinner." He took Natalie's hand, bending to kiss it with his cool lips. "Lovely to meet you, my dear." He nodded to Nick. "Nicholas....until we meet again."

He was gone as quietly as he'd arrived.

Natalie looked at Nick, her eyes clouding with concern. "What was that all about, Nick?" Her voice demanded an answer.

He rose from his seat. "We can't talk about it here. Do you mind if we leave?"

She gathered her things and stood. "That's okay, I think I lost my appetite for dessert."

He slipped an arm around her shoulders protectively."Me too," he murmured.

Once the car had gotten unde way, she turned to him. "Okay, do you want to tell me just who that was?"

"An Elder," he replied, keeping his eyes on the road. "One of the most powerful in existence."

"You know him." It wasn't a question.

"Yes. He's the one who came to take Daniel away from us..."

Daniel's eyes were filled with terror. "Don't let him take me, Nicky. Please. I want to stay with you..."

"Why must you take him away, Stavros?" Nick challenged him. "He's just a boy. He's frightened..."

"Ah, more than a boy, Nicholas. A boy who is now one of us. A great experiment. We can not leave him in LaCroix's hands. He must be trained, studied..."

"We can teach him," Nick implored. "Care for him, teach him the ways of our kind..."

"He's too important," Stavros replied. "Important to us all." He turned to the boy, his hand extended. "Come, child."

"No! Nicky!" He looked from Nick to Janette. "Princess, don't let them take me!"

"I'm sorry, Daniel," Janette said helplessly, trying to keep back the tears. Nick put a comforting arm around her as Stavros led away the child who would be theirs...

Natalie put a comforting hand on his arm, knowing how difficult it must have been. "Did you ever see him again?" she asked gently.

"No." He answered without looking at her.

"Nick," she began, not without trepidation. "What did he want tonight?"

Before he could answer, he had reached the Raven, and pulled up in front. She looked at him in confusion. "What are we doing here?"

He turned to her for the first time, and she could see the fear clouding his eyes. "Natalie, they've been watching us. Since we met, and especially since we conceived this child. I need to know more. Janette will have heard. She knows everything that goes on in Vampire Society in Toronto."

Natalie nodded, not quite sure why she felt suddenly so uneasy. He took her hand as they made their way inside and through the crowd, to find Janette sitting at a corner table.

"We need to talk," he said simply, without greeting. "He came to me tonight."

Janette's eyes grew wide with concern as she led them silently to her private office, where they could converse unheard. "We knew it was only a matter of time," she said as she shut the door behind them. "Ever since they began asking questions..."

And suddenly it occurred to Natalie, that whatever was going on, **they both knew about it.** Indignation began brewing inside her.

She turned to Nick. "Wait, do you mean, you **knew** that someone was following us--" She motioned to Janette. "You **both** knew--and no one bothered to tell **me**?!"

Nick took both her hands in his, and looked into her eyes. "Nat, I didn't want to burden you with this. You were ill, and upset...I didn't want to make things worse."

"Don't you think I had a right to know? My God, Nick, I was walking around oblivious to the fact that I was being watched every minute--"

"Nat, you were never out of my sight," he told her. "That night Janette came over to my apartment, she told me that they were asking questions about me, you, and the baby--"

"And you didn't think I should know," she stated angrily.

"Nat, the next day was the day you drank blood. After that, we both stopped working, and I was with you every minute."

"So that's why you insisted I move in with you?" she asked, suddenly questioning his motives.

He shook his head. "That's only part of the reason. The truth is that I wanted to be there for you. I needed to be with you, just as you needed me. Protecting you was just another part of it."

"Protecting me from what, Nick? What do they want?" Her anger was turning to real panic.

Janette stepped toward them. "Natalie, Stavros was a great scientist. He still is. And he's fascinated by...experiments. Like Daniel." She paused. "Like your child."

"This isn't an experiment!" she cried in outrage, clutching at her abdomen. "It's a baby!"

"Not to Stavros," Nick told her grimly.

"Nick, are you trying to tell me that he wants to take our baby away?" she asked in horror. "He can't! We won't let him..."

Janette gazed sympathetically into her tear-filled eyes. "Natalie, no one can stop Stavros from doing what he wants. We are all powerless to defy him."

Natalie looked to Nick, feeling suddenly helpless. "Nick?"

"He won't take the baby," he assured her. "If it's born totally human, it'll be of no interest to him. He said so himself."

"And if it's not?" she asked frantically. "Nick, I never ran any blood tests. We're not sure--"

He was at a loss for words. He couldn't lie to her about what would happen if the Elders had any indications that the baby had inherited any aspect of his vampiric nature.

"What did he say, Nicolas?" Janette asked. "Why did he come now, tonight, when they birth is still four months away?"

He hesitated, though he knew they were both awaiting his response. He gazed into Natalie's eyes, his own anguish showing through as he reached to caress her cheek. "He wanted to take her away," he whispered.

"Take me? Take me where?" she asked in fear.

"To Paris. To...observe you until the baby's born," he replied, each word painful to him.

"I don't believe this...why won't they leave us alone?" she cried, clearly petrified. "Nick, you won't let them...?" she asked in a small voice.

He gathered her into his arms, holding her tightly. "I'll never let them hurt you," he swore, closing his eyes as his own salt-water tears burned them. He kissed her forehead, repeating in a choked whisper, "Never!"

Janette just watched them, feeling their pain. "Nick, how did you ever convince him to go without her?" she asked gently, knowing Stavros' strong will.

"I told him how harmful it would be to Natalie and the baby," he replied as he led Natalie to the couch, still cradling her in his arms. "He said he would wait, and send an observer to see if the baby's born human."

"That's why it's very important for you to stay away from the blood, Natalie," Janette said, kneeling beside them.

"He tested us, Janette. Offered us blood. And he saw her hesitate. He must suspect something..."

"I couldn't help it," Natalie told them. "The aroma--"

"I know," Nick said, well aware of what a temptation it could be. "That just means it's still dormant in you. You're going to have to keep trying. It's the only way."

"Did he say anything else, Nicolas?" Janette asked.

He nodded. "She can't go to a doctor, or the hospital--just in case."

Natalie looked at him in disbelief. "Just where am I supposed to give birth?"

"In the loft. It's our home. You'll be comfortable there."

"And what if there are complications?" Natalie began.

"Nat, it was the only way I could get him to agree to let you stay with me," he told her firmly. "We don't have a choice."

Her fear had begun to give way to anger once more. "It's not fair, Nick. And I still can't believe all this time you knew somehting like this might happen--"

"He was protecting you, Natalie," Janette broke in. "What good would have done you to live in fear?"

"I deserved to know the truth," she said stubbornly.

"You needed to grow strong, and healthy," he responded. "That was my only concern." He paused. "It still is. The only way to get out of all this is for you to stay calm, and keep taking care of yourself and the baby."

"Stay calm," she repeated. "And how do you propose we do that, knowing what might happen?"

"We forget about it, and try to live our lives," he told her, running his hands through her hair.

But the words were empty, and he knew it.

He simply didn't know what else to say.

Two weeks had passed without a sign of Stavros or his henchmen. No one had come to the Raven, and while Nick

checked with Janette every day, she had nothing new to report.

With each passing day, Nick's guilt grew more intense. He had, after all, involved Natalie in his life. For her love, she might pay dearly. But this time, he would not let guilt drive him away from her. He was determined to be there for her, care for her...

He laid the glass of milk on the night stand, sitting on the edge of the bed. Her back was to him, and he studied her for a moment, wondering if she had fallen asleep. It was early evening, yet after showering and dressing, she had lain back down, claiming to be tired. But Nick knew that it was depression that had plagued her since that night at the restaurant. Her joyful anticipation of their child's birth had turned into helplessness and dread. Yet they had not spoken of it. What was there really to say? And as he witnessed the slow breakdown of her spirit, Nick had to confront his own powerlessness, faced with the reality that there might be nothing he could do to protect his own family. And his own inability to carry out this basic human instinct filled him with anger and frustration...

He put his hand lightly on her arm. "Nat," he said softly. "Are you awake?"

"Yes," she replied emotionlessly.

"I know you're not hungry, but I brought you some milk."

"Thanks. Just leave it there."

He sat there watching her silently for a few moments, wishing she would look at him. Finally, he said, "Natalie, we can't spend the next three and a half months like this. We'll both go crazy."

She turned on her back to look up at him, her eyes betraying the tears long-dried. "What do you suggest we do?"

He shrugged his shoulders. "I don't know--why don't we go to a movie, or for a walk. You need some fresh air. We both do."

"There's nowhere to go that they won't be watching us. I can't live like this...just waiting for them to come and--" She stopped mid-sentence, not wanting to even say it.

Nick said nothing, but his face was filled with pain. He couldn't bear to see her like this. He tried to find a smile within himself, for her sake. "Hey, Nat, why don't you come downstairs? I have a surprise for you."

She allowed him to lead her down the stairs slowly, his arm around her as he said, "I ordered some things through a catalog, and they were delivered while you were asleep..."

In the middle of the living room sat a large collection of baby furniture and supplies: a big wooden crib painted white, a matching changing table with dresser drawers underneath, a dark blue carriage, a stroller, and packages filled with clothes. He pulled a receiving blanket and pajamas with tiny feet from the bag. "Look, I got yellow, since we don't know if it'll be a boy or a girl." He set down the delicate garments and went to the crib, where a

huge white teddy bear sat. He picked it up, offering it to her. "I thought we'd go with the traditional teddy bear. The Barney fad will probably be over by the time the baby's watching tv."

His smile, and the enthusiasm he'd been exuding, faded as he saw the tears filling her eyes. "Is this some kind of joke, Nick?"

His heart fell as he realized that in his attempt to cheer her, he'd only made things worse. "Nat, I just wanted to surprise you...plan for our future...It's only fourteen weeks away...we said we were going to buy some things..."

"That was before we knew that someone would be waiting to take our baby away as soon as it's born--"

She clutched at the teddy bear he'd handed her, falling slowly onto the couch, staring blankly ahead. When she finally spoke, her words, filled with defeat, brought tears to his eyes. "Maybe you can just give this all to Stavros with the baby," she whispered.

He fell to his knees before her, his love for her and need to protect her overpowering all else. "Nat, no one is taking our baby from us," he promised, taking her face in his hands and forcing her to look at him. "I told you, there's no reason at all to doubt that this child will be totally human."

"How can you be so sure?"

He wasn't. But for her, he had to be. "I am," he reassured her.

"I just can't stand sitting here waiting...being watched...wondering if at any moment they might come..."

Fear welled inside him at her words. He knew he could trust Stavros. But it had occurred to him that Stavros did not necessarily have the final word amongst the Elders. He had not even allowed himself to think of what he would do if Stavros were to be forced to go against his word, and come for Natalie now...He knew he would never see her again. She, and the baby, would be lost to him. He fought desperately to control his rising panic as she repeated, "It's the waiting that's killing me..."

"Then we won't wait," he told her suddenly.

"What--?"

"We'll go away, Nat. Leave Toronto. Go off to some isolated place where they won't be watching us. Where we can live in peace until it's closer to the time."

She was contemplating his words, but knew the danger. "They'll follow us..."

He shook his head, his eyes lighting up as the perfect plan unraveled. "Nat, they can only follow us at night. We'll travel by day. I can stay in the trunk, and you can drive. It's perfect."

"I don't know," she said dubiously.

"Listen to me," he said, bringing himself up to the couch to face her, his hands resting lightly on her arms. "We can't have you a nervous wreck for the next three and a half months. It's not good for you, or the baby."

"I don't know..."

"Nat, the waiting's driving me crazy, too. I really need to get away, be alone with you, so we can enjoy this time together. We deserve it."

She looked into his eyes, the ray of hope there becoming infectious. "Where would we go?" she asked, begining to consider it.

"Schanke's cottage up north. He just told me today that they closed it up for the winter this past weekend. There's no danger of anyone showing up, and if Schanke doesn't know, no one can get information out of him."

She smiled slightly. "I guess if we could pull it off--"

He grinned broadly, wrapping his arms around her. "Of course we can. Look, it's only eight-thirty. Why don't we make a list of what we'll need, get some rest, and then as soon as it's light you can get to the stores without anyone seeing you. I'll help you pack things up, and we can leave by mid-afternoon."

She nodded, then kissed him. They needed this. **She** needed this.

And as he held her against his chest, his smile slowly faded. He couldn't tell her that this would be more than just a reprieve. If he had his way, they would stay away until the baby was born. And if by some small chance their child should be born with any signs of his curse...

They would never come back.

Natalie filled her cart with all the medical supplies they might need on their journey. Nick was right--if she went into premature labor, they'd have to be prepared. Satisfied that she had found all she could, she went to the cashier.

And as the girl rang up her order, she saw them. She'd never bought them before, never really had to. But she thought now of the last time she and Nick had been lying in bed together...Nick had told her that he now felt he could control himself, yet still feared reinfecting her with his bodily fluids. The solution was right in front of her.

"Could I please have a box of...those?" she stammered, embarrassed, as she pointed at the lubricated latex condoms.

Her awkwardness mounted as the sales girl glanced at her strangely, until she realized why. In her condition, buying condoms probably seemed like shutting the barn door after the horse was already out! She smiled to herself as she took her change. Who cared what anyone thought! Soon, she and Nick would be alone, safe...and in each other's arms once more.

The sun was already high in the sky as Natalie drove away from the city. At her side, Sidney sat complacently in his carrier, while the back seat was stuffed with clothes, food, supplies, and whatever personal items they'd been able

to fit. For some reason, as she sat behind the wheel heavy with child, the image of Linda Hamilton in the last scene of The Terminator came to her mind. Where had she been escaping to--Mexico? She laughed as she mumbled to Sidney, "I feel just like Sarah Connor. The only difference is that you're not a guard dog, and I don't think she had anyone riding in the trunk."

From his resting place, Nick smiled as his acute hearing brought her remark to him. He longed to be out there with her...

He shifted uncomfortably, wishing he could sleep. But until he and Natalie were safely away, he would find no peace.

Hours later, as the late summer sky turned crimson with the setting sun, Natalie stopped on the shoulder of the deserted road, tapping on the trunk. From the inside it opened, as Nick yawned and stretched, hopping out as the sun slipped below the horizon.

"Good morning...or is it good evening?" she said cheerily as he hugged her.

"How do you feel?" he asked.

"Okay. Just tired. We're almost there."

He kissed her on the cheek, going to open the passenger door for her. "Sorry, Sidney, you're going to have to go on the floor," he told the cat as he helped Natalie into the seat.

He hopped in beside her, his energy returning. "This countryside is beautiful," he commented as the Caddy moved into a leisurely motion once more.

"According to this map, it's probably right past the town..."

They were driving through a small village, dotted with quaint houses and no more than five or six stores. The town hall was a tiny house on a lush green lawn, not far from what must have been the town's only church. Nick found himself thinking back to the small church houses in France when he was an altar boy...

"It's lovely, isn't it?" Natalie asked, catching his gaze as he stopped for a red light.

"Yes," he murmured, then turned to her. "Natalie, maybe it's just my thirteenth century morals rising to the surface..." He took her hand. "But I wish we could get married before the baby's born."

He could see the same desire in her eyes. But she said, "Nick, we already talked about this. You know churches are still a problem for you."

He breathed deeply. While his tolerance to the sun, garlic, crosses, and other holy symbols had slowly increased, a visit to St. John's had still filled him with discomfort, anxiety... "I know, Nat. I just wish--"

"So do I," she broke in. "But I also want our wedding day to be the happiest day of our lives. Could it really be, with all this hanging over our heads?"

"I guess not," he said, looking down to her abdomen, guilt invading his being.

"Look, Nick, we could get married in a civil service if we wanted. But I don't think the legal aspect of it is what's important to either of us. It's having God bless our union..."

He looked into her eyes, smiling as he brought his hand up to her cheek. "He already has."

She leaned against him as the light turned green and he drove on towards their private sanctuary.

The cottage was on an isolated stretch of land, miles from neighbors or the village whose quaint little church had filled them both with a bittersweet longing. Nick carried in their things while Natalie explored the Schankes' summer home. She turned up the thermostat to seventy-five degrees, shivering at the chill in the air, but glad that Don and Myra had decided to winterize the year before. "Are you sure they won't be coming up here?" she asked, examining a collage of family photos hanging over the mantle.

"Positive," he called from the kitchen as he put their food away. He peeked into the living room. "Nat, would you please check all the windows for me? I'll set up Sidney's box, and then we can relax--"

When they'd completed their respective chores, and had a bite to eat, they collapsed together on the couch. Natalie closed her eyes as she lay against his chest. "I'm so tired..."

"So am I," he said, playing with her hair. It was still early evening, but only now that they were safe could he truly relax. His lack of good sleep was beginning to catch up with him. "What do you say we go to bed?"

She smiled, still snuggling against him. "You're lucky I'm so sleepy, or I might ask you how you meant that..."

He grinned as he carried her to the bed. "If I weren't so tired, I might show you," he replied as he lay her down. He settled beside her, taking her into his arms for a long, deep kiss. "I'm so glad we came here," he whispered in her ear.

"So am I," she said, cuddling against him. She laughed lightly. "Although, the thought of lying in Schanke and Myra's bed--"

"What they don't know won't hurt them," he said, finding her lips once more.

And later, as she slept in his arms, he tried to supress the passion which his closeness to her aroused. He wanted her so badly...needed her...but until he could be sure that their union wouldn't harm her...

I can wait. We have time now, Nat. I'll keep you safe. And someday soon...

He held her tightly, possessively, as he fell into his first peaceful sleep in weeks.

The Indian summer had been a blessing over the last two weeks, as Nick and Natalie had slowly allowed themselves to slip into a simpler way of life. The warm September evenings had afforded them the luxury of long walks in the forest, midnight swims, and nights of lying outside on the grass looking up at the immense star field rarely visible through the bright lights of Toronto. Nick had even ventured finally outside in the day, excited by his increasing ability to withstand the sun for limited periods of time. His humanity, and the birth of their child, drew wondrously near.

It was after one of their daytime jaunts into town to shop, that Nick hesitated outside the door, lifting up his face, closing his eyes to feel the warm rays of sunlight. She came up behind him, reaching to kiss him on the neck. "Don't overdo it, sweetie," she whispered.

He stood a moment, excited by the touch of her lips, the feel of her soft breath... When she separated from him, he smiled at her, nodding. "Let's go inside."

And as she closed the door behind them, he took her into his arms, kissing her hungrily. "I love you," he breathed. He held her against him, closing his eyes in frustration as he buried his face in her hair. "Oh, God, Natalie, I want you so badly."

"Then make love to me," she said. "Nick, I need you. It's been so long..."

He pulled away to look into her eyes. "Nat, I'm afraid to--"

"You can control the vampire. You've come so far--"

"I know. But I can't take a chance of infecting you again, of making you sick."

He was puzzled by the smile on her face as she said, "I think I know a way of getting around that."

Curiously, he let her lead him to the bedroom. She motioned for him to sit down as she pulled a package from her purse and handed it to him.

He looked up at her in surprise. "Condoms? Will these really work?"

"Of course they will. 95% effective."

He hesitated. "What about the other 5%? Nat, I don't want to take a chance--"

"Nick, listen to me. Whatever is dormant in you, is probably dormant in me, too. From a medical standpoint, I really don't think your blood would have any effect on me at all at this stage. But if we want to be sure, for the baby's sake, this is the best way." She paused, uncomfortable pressing him. She had, after all, waited for him to broach the subject. She relaxed to see him smile slightly.

"You had these all the time, didn't you?" he asked.

"Well..."

He took one out of the box, looking at it as sudden embarrassment crossed his eyes. "Nat, I don't know how to say this, but..." He looked up at her, his face flushing slightly. "...I never used one of these. I don't think...I know how..."

He was afraid she might laugh. But her expression was one of understanding as she said, "It's okay. I can show you..."

She took it from his hand, setting it on the night stand. She was ever-amazed at the innocence and naivete of someone who had lived so many lives...perhaps it was what made him so endearing. She reached up to touch his face, bringing his lips to hers. "I love you," she said simply.

And suddenly she knew that he was ready to drop the wall that he'd so carefully maintained to protect her and the baby from harm. For knowing now that he could have her without risk, without danger, he was truly free. To hold her, to love her...

With a greater hunger than blood had ever driven in him, he kissed her passionately, his mouth exploring hers as his hands gently began to undress her. And as his lips found the softness of her breasts, she sighed in pleasure as his tongue began to taste her, tease her. Her fingers laced around his neck, caressing his hair, making their way down to his shirt, unbuttoning it, as his lips joined hers once more in a slow, sensuous kiss. And now it was her turn to move down his body, along his perfect chest, the hair on his stomach tickling her as she moved downward. He lay there in ecstasy as she undressed him, releasing him, tasting him, playing with him with her tongue, taking him into the sanctuary of her mouth, aroused by her own power to bring him such pleasure. She could hear him moaning in delight, feel his hands running loving through her hair...and then he was gently lifting her head from him, bringing it up to kiss her, as his hands reached for her own warmth. He smiled at her as he felt the heat of her own arousal, then bent down to taste her, to pleasure her as she had him. She held his head there, quivering at the touch of his tongue on her most intimate self, her body reaching up instinctively to meet the tender caresses of his mouth...

And as her body burned for him, he rose to look at her, whispering, "Natalie, I want to be inside you..." She reached for the condom, ripping open the package, taking him into her hands, caressing him as he pulsed at her touch. He watched, entranced, as she slid the condom on...

She fell back now, waiting for him, inviting him. He looked down at her, touching her abdomen lightly. "Is it okay like this?" he asked hesitantly. At her smile of assurance, he carefully lay himself on top of her, entering her, dancing inside her, ever aware of their child, the product of their love, nestled between their bodies as they melded into one.

Natalie held tightly to him, the fire between her legs almost unbearable as she rose up to meet him in swift, desperate movements. The frustrated desire that had tortured them both for months was driving them now, as they clung to each other in a wild quest for relief. Natalie cried out as her passion suddenly reached its pinnacle, feeling her insides contract violently, uncontrollably. This was all

that Nick needed. The warm pulsing rush of her climax brought him to his own, as he erupted inside her.

Nick held her for a long moment, then sighed deeply as he lay on his back, letting her remove the condom, disposing of it. She settled back into his arms, and he hugged her tightly. "I love you so much," he whispered as he brought the cover up over them.

"I love you," she replied, relishing the sensation of his naked skin against hers.

They slept together for the rest of the night and day.

A week later...

She awoke to his warm caress, his fingers running lightly down her neck, to her breast. He cupped her gently in his hand as his lips went to hers. She responded with a hungry kiss, as she drew him close, excited by the sensation of his arousal against her. His hand moved down to touch her, ready her...

And suddenly he tensed, pulling away. "My God, Natalie.."

She gasped as she looked at his hand covered with blood...her own.

Her heart was beating rapidly as he he led her to the bathroom, and she closed the door to be alone. No, there was no doubt...

The fear on his face matched her own as she left the bathroom, gladly accepting the robe he wrapped around her. "Nat, what is it?! Why are you bleeding?"

"I don't know," she replied, shaken, as he put her back in bed. He sat beside her, holding her hand between his.

Guilt mixed with his terror. "Nat, is it because we...?!"

She shook her head, trying to regain her composure for his sake. "No. I don't think so. It's common to stain, or bleed. My sister-in-law did at six months..."

"What did they do for her?" he asked anxiously. He kissed her hand. "What can I do for **you**?"

"Nothing. She was in the hospital a couple of days...then had to stay in bed for another ten weeks. It'll be okay--" she looked at him, her eyes betraying her own fright. "--as long as it stops."

For the rest of the day, he made her stay in bed, first bringing her food and drink, then lying down to hold her. By nightfall, the bleeding had ceased completely, and they both breathed a sigh of relief.

"It'll be okay, now," she assured him, as they lay face to face. "I just need to stay in bed."

But his face was still filled with worry. "Nat, I don't have to tell you how frightened I was--I still am."

"There's no need to be. It stopped--"

"But it happened. You have to see a doctor."

She shook her head. "We both know I can't do that."

"I know. But Nat, it occurred to me that I don't even know where the closest hospital is--certainly a long drive. And I can't fly anymore. What would I have done? What could I do if it happened again--if you really needed help?"

She knew what he was getting at, and it filled her with dread. "Look, Nick, if we're here or in Toronto--what's the difference? You promised Stavros we wouldn't go to a hospital--"

"The difference," he said tenderly, "is that if something happens to you in Toronto, I **will** take you to a hospital--no matter what Stavros said. I won't risk your life or our baby's."

"Nick, please..." she begged, tears filling her eyes. "I don't want to go back."

"We have to, my love," he whispered.

And she knew he was right. She moved closer to him, burying her head in his chest. Maybe they would have to leave their idyllic hideaway. But for now, they were here. She closed her eyes, trying to make it all go away.

Nick's face was grim as he drove back towards Toronto, and the possible danger that he'd wanted so desperately to avoid. He glanced at Natalie, dozing peacefully at his side. The foreboding that had nearly vanished over the last four weeks had suddenly returned, as the city lights came into view. It had seemed such a perfect plan--keep her hidden away until the baby's birth, and after, if it were necessary. But he hadn't anticipated the problems that had developed with her pregnancy. Her health, and the baby's, were the paramount issues now. She had to be in safe distance of a hospital, just in case. If Stavros disapproved, Nick would deal with him later. And if they should come for her, or the baby...

...he would fight with every last breath to protect them.

He looked once more to Natalie's serene form. After a week's rest, she had come to terms with what they must do. And he knew that their brief time away had lifted her spirits, their renewed intimacy given them both strength to go on. He would conceal his own trepidation from her, veil it in hope. He had to.

Natalie had gone to bed, and he sat alone in the living room, waiting....for what? He didn't know. Perhaps some sign that they had been here...

He pressed the recall button on the answering machine, listening to a myriad of concerned messages...Schanke, Grace, Schanke, Schanke, Janette, Janette, Janette...

He dialed her number. "Janette?"

"Nicolas, where have you been?" Her voice was filled with a mixture of anger and worry.

He began to tell her, but she stopped him. "I'm coming over."

He heard her sports car moments later, then waited as the elevator door opened. "How could you just go off like that without telling me?" she complained the moment she stepped out.

He held a finger to his lips. "Nat's sleeping upstairs," he told her.

"At least you're both all right. I didn't know what to think!" she said in a hushed whisper.

"I'm sorry, Janette. I didn't want to involve anyone else--for your safety and ours."

"I already am involved just by virtue of our friendship," she replied, and he knew she meant it. He gave her a hug, kissing her lightly. It was good to see her, and know once more that she was there for both of them.

"I'm sorry, Janette."

"What did you think you were doing, Nick?" she asked, separating from him. "If Stavros had come by looking for you--"

"Then there was no one," he said in relief.

She shook her head. "Not as far as I know. But you took a chance of angering them--"

"He never said we had to stay in town. We had to get away."

"Until the birth--or permanently?" she asked, knowing him too well.

"I don't even know," he admitted. "Janette, I was afraid of losing Natalie and the baby." He paused, looking into her eyes. "I still am."

She put a hand on his arm. "I know, **cheri**. But you can't think of that now. And you musn't let Natalie feel that from you."

He told her why he had decided to come back.

"Then you must keep her calm. And plan for the birth. Now, who will you have in attendance?"

"What do you mean?" he asked, confused.

"There are many of our kind who are doctors--"

"No," he said adamantly. "No strangers. She wouldn't want that. She's a doctor. And I have been, too..."

"Then it will just be us?" she asked.

He raised an eyebrow and smiled, "Us?"

"You'll need help, Nicolas. Remember--you're the father. You may panic."

"Janette, that's really not--"

"Darling, you forget I was the eldest of eight children, five of whom I helped the midwife to deliver."

Nick looked at her dubiously. "Uh, Janette, that was eight hundred years ago--"

She flashed him a knowing smile. "I have a very good memory."

He smiled, quite touched by her willingness to help. "Okay. I'll mention it to Nat." He kissed her, a kiss much **friendlier** in nature than their usual. "Thank you."

She raised an eyebrow, a playful warning in her eyes. "Just don't tell anyone that I've grown soft-hearted towards humans. It's just a vicious rumor."

Daniel's eyes glowed amber, his fangs extended as he fought to free himself from Stavros' grasp. "Nicky, help me!" he pleaded, struggling. Nick's entire being filled with anger as he watched, helpless...

Suddenly Daniel was gone. And Natalie stood before him in a flowing white gown, an angelic infant in her arms. She smiled at Nick, holding the child out to him. Her eyes were filled with tears of joy as she whispered, "We have a son..."

Exhilaration welled in him as he reached for the baby...when a tall dark figure ripped the child from his mother's grasp. Natalie screamed as her son's abductor disappeared in the distance, a great bird in flight. Frantic, Nick took off after him...but his legs were like lead, unable to move.

"Nick, please, do something!" Natalie cried hysterically.

But once more he was helpless.

He awoke with a start, sweat drenching his pillow. Where was he? What had happened?

He sighed in relief as his head cleared. He was in bed. It had been a dream. Natalie was snuggled against him, her back to him, just as she'd been when they'd made love. He buried his face in the scent of her hair, the arm around her coming to rest on her abdomen. Yes, a dream. The baby was still safe in his mother's womb.

Two months had passed since their return. And while he'd managed to convince Natalie that everything would be all right, his own nerves had deteriorated. Hence, his latest nightmare.

When would it end?

He held onto her just a bit more tightly as he willed himself back to sleep. He prayed he wouldn't dream.

The cold November wind was biting, but Natalie found it refreshing. As much as she loved Toronto's fleeting summer, the wintertime did have its charm. And with Nick to hold her at night, the winter didn't seem quite so cold...

She smiled as she thought of him, and the way he'd cared for her over the past few months. So loving, so thoughtful, so protective. And as the excitement mounted over their baby's coming birth, her fear over what might happen had slowly dissipated. The baby would be human. They all were now. That other world slipped further and further away...

She stopped into the corner store, said hello to the old man who'd gotten to know her, and headed straight

towards her destination--the ice cream freezer. Nick had laughed at her midnight cravings, but she'd reminded him that there were far worse things she could crave...

They'd returned from their LaMaze class, practiced her breathing exercises, then fallen asleep watching an old movie. She'd awakened to images of ice cream sundaes, and a freezer devoid of anything that might satisfy her urge. Nick hadn't really let her out of his sight since they'd returned, but how could she wake him from such a peaceful sleep? With a brief kiss that she hoped would penetrate his dreams, she'd grabbed her coat for a quick trip to the store, leaving him a note in case he should awaken.

Now, with the intensity of a woman on a mission, she studied her choices, settling finally on Heavenly Hash for herself, and a Cookie Dough for Nick. Maybe she'd mix them...

It wasn't until she'd ventured back into the cold that she saw him. With light brown hair and eyes, a young boy, no older that eleven or twelve, stood watching her. Something in his gaze made her uneasy, but her curiosity obscured her apprehension.

"Isn't it a little late for you to be out alone?" she asked in a maternal tone.

"Not really, Miss. I like the night." An accent. British was her first guess.

Their eyes locked for a moment, and she felt as if he were delving into her mind. She shook the feeling off, attributing it to...anything but what she most feared. **It's a little boy. That's all**, she told herself. Another voice whispered, **Don't be afraid.** She could hear it more easily than obey it.

"When's your baby due?" the child was asking pleasantly.

She hesitated, until she realized that in her state it was an obvious question. "Three weeks," she replied, then glanced up at their apartment. "Well, I'd better be going." Then, as an afterthought, "You really shouldn't be out here. It's not safe."

She had already hurried back to the house before he responded softly, "No, Natalie. It's not."

The elevator door slid open and Nick was waiting for her with a worried look on his face. "Nat, where did you think you were going at this hour?"

"For ice cream. Didn't you get my note?"

"Yeah, I got it," he replied, taking the package from her. He set it down, then hugged her. "I'm sorry, I was just worried. The phone woke me up, and when I didn't see you, I panicked."

"I'm sorry for worrying you," she told him, warming her cheek against his, for a change.

"Just don't do it again," he breathed, closing his eyes as he found her lips.

They were interrupted by the ring of his door buzzer. He went to the monitor, where the black and white screen made Janette seem even more pale against her dark attire. "Nicolas," she was saying impatiently, "don't make me do this human thing to the hilt, or I'll just fly through the window--"

He smiled as he buzzed her in. She was trying.

"At least she doesn't just barge in," Natalie commented.

"She's making an attempt to respect our privacy," he pointed out sheepishly. "She's the one who called and woke me. She wanted to bring us a present for the baby."

"That's...very nice," Natalie said, trying to sound good-natured. She had only seen Janette once since the blood episode, an awkward meeting where Natalie had attempted to free herself of even the slightest hint of jealousy. Not that she didn't still feel it at times--but now that she was in control, she would never again betray her insecurity to Nick's ageless friend.

"These elevators are so slow," Janette was complaining as she appeared. She pulled down the black hood, shaking her hair out as Nick helped her off with her cape. "Bonsoir, Nicolas," she said pleasantly, giving him a brief kiss on the cheek. She turned to Natalie. "And how are you feeling? My, you look just about ready to pop!"

Nick looked at Natalie quickly, dreading the cat fight he feared might erupt. He was proud of Natalie as she merely responded, "I've been feeling ready to for a while now, but it just keeps getting bigger..."

But it was clear to both of them at once that Janette's comment had not been intended as it had turned out. For her eyes were filled with a real...admiration? "You're very lucky, Natalie," she intimated as the women sat down. "This is the one thing...probably the only thing...I regret about my immortality."

Natalie smiled, affected by Janette's sincerity, almost **feeling sorry for her!** And as she realized what Janette had always known, that this was the one part of Nick that Janette could never have, the last tinge of jealousy was gone once and for all. As if sensing his mother's contentment, Baby Knight began to kick furiously. She laughed. "I think he's trying to get out," she commented, then, at Janette's look of surprise, offered, "Would you like to feel it, Janette?"

"May I?" she asked, and at Natalie's nod, lightly placed her cool hand on Natalie's abdomen. Her eternal eyes lit up in wonder as she felt the child's movement, sensing its very essence. Death meeting Life.

Nick watched her reaction with a smile, beaming as he sat beside Natalie, putting his arm around her. "It's amazing, isn't it, Janette?"

"Yes," she said as she took her hand away, a wistful look suddenly appearing in her eyes. She forced it away, as she rummaged in her bag for the small package wrapped

elegantly in gold foil. "This is for the baby. I hope you both like it."

Natalie accepted the gift, thanking her, looking at Nick, who nodded for her to open it. The small white satin garment, with its delicate lace decoration, left them both breathless. "Janette, it's beautiful," Natalie told her, then, after a pause where realization hit, "It's a Christening gown..."

"Nicolas told me your plans to baptize the child," she explained, obviously uncomfortable with the subject. "It reminded me of the kind we used to have in France. Of course, I won't be able to make the ceremony," she said, attempting to lighten the moment, "but I wanted you to know I wish you well."

"Thank you," Natalie said warmly, impulsively giving her a hug.

"Thank you, Janette." Nick was so moved by her gesture, he could find no other words. He kissed her lightly on the cheek.

"You're both very welcome." She smiled slightly, and Nick once again was struck by how much her attitude had changed, as she'd come to accept his decision, his mortality...and Natalie.

"Janette, Nick's told me that you've offered to help with the birth. I really appreciate it."

"Well, you need to have another woman there," Janette replied. "Besides, I'm sure Nick will be a nervous wreck."

"I will not," he responded in mock defensiveness.

"You are already," Natalie chided him, then put her hand on his. "I'm sure you'll do fine."

The conversation went on to other things: children, parenting, and how frightening it could be to raise a child in today's world.

"Some parents just don't seem to care," Natalie was saying. "Why, I just saw a little boy outside on the street all alone--he couldn't have been more than ten or twelve, and it was almost midnight."

The hair on Nick's neck bristled at her words. "Outside here, Nat?"

"Yeah, when I went for ice cream."

"What did he look like? Did he talk to you?"

"Yes, in fact, he had an accent. British I think. He was about this tall, with light brown hair, brown eyes...Nick? Why is this important?" She could see Nick glance worriedly at Janette, who was returning the same concern.

"Daniel," Janette whispered.

"What?" Natalie asked, her eyes filling with fear.

"So you remember me, Princess."

They turned as one to see the figure that had suddenly appeared by the window. Natalie recognized the child from the grocery store, while Nick and Janette saw the boy who'd been taken away so long ago.

"Daniel," Nick said, standing.

"Hello, Nicky. Good to see you again."

"What are you doing here?" he demanded, furious at Daniel's having found a way into his home, much less having approached Natalie alone. Natalie had come to stand beside him, and he stepped in front of her, shielding her with his body.

"What kind of greeting is that? I thought you'd be glad to see me after all these years."

The sincere disappointment, on the face that still belonged to a boy he'd grown to care for, pulled at Nick's paternal heartstrings. He had to remind himself that this was no longer a boy, but a creature that had killed to survive his last eighty years. How had that existence transformed him?

"Of course we're glad to see you, Daniel," Janette said, going to him. "We're just surprised. Until Stavros came, we didn't even know what had happened to you."

"He sent you, didn't he?" Nick accused, still keeping himself between the young vampire and Natalie.

"Fitting isn't it?" Daniel walked around to face him. "One experiment sent to witness the birth of the second."

Anger flared in Nick's eyes. "There's no experiment here. I've told Stavros that. Just a child. A human child."

"Like I was?" Daniel retorted bitterly. "Poor Nicky, still trying to live a normal life and play 'daddy'. What makes you think you can protect this child any more than you did me? If the Elders want it, they'll have it."

Daniel's resentment fueled the flame of Nick's guilt. I **did let him down. And he can't forget it either.** His face softened. "Daniel, I know I let you down. But I tried to make you run away before LaCroix could bring you over. You know that."

"Yes, I do," he admitted hesitantly, before his angry countenance returned. "But you should never have taken me in in the first place," he snapped. He glanced from Janette back to Nick. "Neither of you. You had to know what LaCroix would do."

"We wanted to care for you, Daniel, that's all," Janette broke in sincerely.

"Well, you failed," he responded brusquely. "Do you know what my life has been? A mature mind trapped in the body of a boy? I fit in nowhere! Forever a child to the mortal world, unable to even pretend to be a mortal man. And to those of our kind, I'm but an oddity, a freak, LaCroix's experiment." He glared at Nick. "Here you stand with a beautiful woman by your side...such pleasures could never be mine, in the mortal world or in ours. For eighty years the Elders have kept me under their close watch, their observation, monitoring my every move. You complain of your own existence, while yours has been a paradise compared to mine. At least you had the freedom to choose your way. I have never enjoyed such liberties." He paused, looking into Nick's eyes. "And I never will until--"

"--until they find some other experiment to keep their interest," Nick finished for him. "Isn't that it, Daniel?

You want them to take our baby so that they'll leave you alone."

"No..." he heard Natalie say from behind him.

Nick's gaze was unswerving. "Isn't it true, Daniel?"

"Yes, it will free me," he conceded. "But regardless, they want your child. And they always get what they want, don't they, Nicky?"

Nick shook his head. "Not this time," he said firmly.

"And how do you propose to stop them? From what I've seen and heard, you're virtually mortal now."

"And so is our child," Nick replied. "Making it of no interest to them."

"We'll see, won't we?" Daniel's voice was as ominous as his words, both incongruous with the face of the child he once was, and would always be. "I've been sent to observe...and report back to them. Suppose I don't think it's possible to determine at birth the true nature of the child? I may recommend they observe it further..."

Nick could feel Natalie's nails digging into his arm as his own anger welled. "I will not let you take our child just to avenge what was done to you eighty years ago. LaCroix was responsible; I was not. I won't let you sacrifice an innocent baby to buy your own freedom."

"I'd call it bloody fair; you couldn't save me, but your child can--"

"Nothing will save you from your existence except yourself," Nick told him in quiet fury.

"Become human like you?" he asked in amusement.

"Perhaps," Nick replied, deadly serious. "Or end it all if you wish. Those are your options. But you will not use our child for your purposes. I would die before letting anyone take Natalie or the baby from me. And I will destroy you or anyone who tries."

Daniel regarded him for a moment, the amusement washing from his face as he considered Nick's words. He looked from Natalie to Nick, from the fear in her eyes, to the determination in his. He watched as Nick slowly slipped his arm around Natalie, holding her protectively, as if defying Daniel to intrude upon their little world. Daniel moved towards the door slowly, looking back at them before he made his exit.

"I will be back when the time comes," he said simply.

As soon as the door had slid shut, Nick turned to Natalie. "It'll be all right. I don't want you to worry about this."

But panic had already begun to set in. In his arms, Nick could feel her trembling. "Not worry? Nick, he doesn't care if the baby is human or not! He intends on taking it anyway!"

"He's not going to," Nick promised her. "None of them will."

"My God, Nick, how can we stop them?" she whispered, her eyes filling with tears. "What are we going to--oh!" He face registered more surprise than pain as she reached down to her abdomen.

"Nat, what is it?" he asked, alarmed, as Janette came closer.

She looked up at him, a mixture of wonder and dread in her eyes. "It was a contraction. I think I'm going into labor."

Nick had taken her up to the bedroom, making her lie down to wait for the next contraction. It came an hour and a half later, then another an hour after that. He sat beside her, watching her worriedly as she and Janette tried to reassure him.

"It's too early," he kept saying.

"It was the stress, Nicolas," Janette told him. "Don't panic, please. It won't help."

"It's okay," Natalie said. "It's the eight month. The baby's already turned."

"It's their fault," he muttered under his breath, bitterly.

"That doesn't matter, now," Janette chastised him. The most important thing is for Natalie to rest. She may have a long labor ahead of her."

Nick nodded, knowing he had to get a grip on his own emotions for her sake.

"And since we'll be here for a while, I think I should go back to my place and get some things," Janette added.

Natalie looked up at her with a mischievous twinkle in her eye. "You can always borrow my clothes..."

"Thank you. I think I'll pass," she replied in the same spirit. "Besides, if I'm going to be here for a while, I think I should get something to drink. Your cupboards are bare."

"That's a matter of opinion," Natalie replied.

Nick looked from one to the other. "How can you two joke at a time like this?" he asked nervously.

Janette laughed. "Calm down, Nicolas. We've got a long wait."

He watched her leave, his brow wrinkling with anxiety as he wondered suddenly what he would do if the time came before she returned. "She's right, Nick," Natalie said quietly at his side. "We have to keep calm."

He sat beside her, taking her hand as he looked into her eyes, so serene now, so devoid of fear.

"Are you all right?" he asked.

She nodded. "I have to be. I'm trying not to think about anything but the baby."

He leaned his head closer to hers, glad that they were alone now, kissing her tenderly. She wrapped her arms around his neck, her tight embrace the only indication of how truly afraid she was. As she leaned back on the pillow he smiled at her, admiring, as always, her strength.

"You know, we haven't even had time to think of a name," he said, trying to keep the conversation light.

"Well, if it's a boy, I think we should name him Nicholas, Jr."

He made a face. "No. There's been a Nicholas around for eight hundred years."

"Well, do you have a better idea?" she challenged.

He nodded. "How about Richard?" he suggested softly.

Natalie's face brightened, his sentiment touching her deeply. To give new life, in a way, to the brother they had been unable to save..."Okay," she said. "And if it's a girl--is there someone you'd like to name her for?"

He thought a moment. "I suppose 'Natalie' is out of the question."

"Yup."

He considered a bit longer, then finally said, "Joan."

Natalie smiled, understanding. Joan of Arc. The woman who had made him believe he could regain his faith. "That's a beautiful name. And I think she would appreciate it."

Suddenly, the pain began to surge again, heading towards its peak. Nick could see it in her face, and squeezed her hand, reminding her to breathe, as they had learned in the LaMaze class. When it had subsided, she lay back on the pillow with a deep sigh of relief. "That one was bad. How long was it since the last?"

"A half hour," he replied, trying to obscure his worry.

She smiled wanly. "I don't even want to think of how bad it's going to get. I'm really a coward, you know."

Nick shook his head. "No. Not you. I'm the one who's scared to death. It's your courage and hope that got us this far in the first place."

She caressed his hand against her cheek. "We did it together," she said softly, then added with a light laugh, "Especially this."

Nick gave her a kiss. "Is there anything I can do for you?"

"Just stay here with me," she replied as her eyes closed. He watched her pensively as she rested in anticipation of what was to come.

"Breathe, Nat, breathe..." Nick was saying as she panted wildly, clutching at his hand.

"God, it's awful!" she cried, tears streaming down her face. There was no respite between contractions now, just one continuous pain as the baby slowly made its way down her birth canal. Janette had offered to take the pain away, but Natalie had refused, wanting to be aware of every moment, every sensation. Now she almost wished she had relented, as her insides seemed to be ripping apart from within. "Oh, God, Nick!"

"It's okay, Nat," he soothed her, wiping the sweat from her brow with a damp cloth. He was kneeling beside her, his face level with hers as she held desperately onto his hand. "Breathe, my love, breathe..."

"I can see the head!" Janette called excitedly. "You're going to have to push, Natalie! This is it--"

"Push, Nat, come on, you can do it--"

"Nick!"

"I'm right here, Nat...Come on, push..."

"The head is out! I see the shoulders..."

Natalie screamed as the pain became unbearable. She could hear Nick's voice, urging her to push, and without thinking, she obeyed, struggling against the agony, knowing that maybe if she pushed hard enough, it would stop...

She was dying. She had to be. She couldn't hurt this much and live. She grasped Nick's hand, concentrating on his voice, not wanting to let go of him, of life. The pain intensified, and she began to scream uncontrollably...

Suddenly: release, relief. And as her own screams died, she could hear a baby's cry, and Janette's triumphant announcement.

"It's a boy!"

The tears of pain turned to tears of joy as Nick's jubilant laughter rang out. He kissed her full on the lips, and as his face came away from hers she could see the happiness in his eyes.

He pulled away from her, looking in wonder at the tiny infant whose birth he had just witnessed. Janette held the baby out to him, her own eyes filled with a greater awe than he had ever seen there. "Here is your son, Nicolas," she said softly. Gingerly, Nick took the child into his arms, amazed at the tiny body, the angelic face, the delicate fingers and toes, the soft white skin, still covered in his mother's blood. Janette had tied the umbilical cord, but he knew that the blood was making her feel weak. "I'll clean him," he told her, and she nodded.

She turned towards the door, but looked back as he called her name.

"Janette...thank you."

She smiled. "I'll leave you two alone with your son."

He carried the baby to Natalie, placing him in her open arms.

"Oh Nick, he's so beautiful..."

He sat beside her, brushing the hair from her forehead with his fingers, then kissing her there. "Just as beautiful as his mother," he whispered. He slipped his arm around her. "Do you know how proud I am of you?"

She lay back against him, still entranced by the tiny life resting in her careful embrace. "Well, I did do most of the work--" She looked up at him. "But I don't think I could have done it without you here."

He kissed her tenderly. "I love you, Nat."

"I love you, too."

He held her for a long time as they watched the baby squirming in his mother's arms. "I'd better clean him up," Nick suggested finally. "Come on, Richard. Let Daddy give you your first bath..."

When he returned, Natalie seemed to have taken on an air of apprehension. She quickly reached out for the baby, her face filled with worry as she held him possessively.

"What is it, Nat?" he asked, although he knew the answer.

"They're going to be coming, Nick," she said without taking her gaze from her son's face. "I won't let them take him...I won't..." Her eyes had begun to fill with tears, and Nick wasted no time in wrapping his arms around her.

"Shhhh, Nat, it's okay. No one's going to take him. I promise--"

They looked up as Janette entered, her face filled with foreboding. "Nicolas, you have...a visitor."

Nick stood slowly, nodding to Janette, who came to stand by Natalie's side. And suddenly Daniel was at the doorway. Natalie gasped.

"Outside," Nick told him firmly.

"But I have a job to do, Nicky," Daniel replied, ignoring his request. He walked to the bed as both Janette and Nick moved closer to the baby and his mother.

"Congratulations are in order," the young vampire said pleasantly. "What have you named him?"

"Richard," Natalie responded, tightening her grasp on the infant.

Daniel approached her, and Nick put his hand on Natalie's shoulder to remind her that he was there. And as the boy who had lived almost a century carefully inspected the tiny creature, his eyes filled with an almost child-like amazement. "He's so...small."

Nick picked up on his wonder and put in, "Probably only four or five pounds."

"I think...I would be afraid to pick him up," Daniel muttered under his breath.

"Look at him, Daniel," Nick told him. "A fragile, helpless, **human** infant. No great experiment, and of no great importance to the Elders. But to **us**--" he paused as Daniel looked up at him, "--he's everything. And I won't let anyone harm him."

Daniel was softening, and Nick knew it.

"Touch his skin, Daniel. That soft, warm skin. Do you sense anything but purity--mortality--from him?"

Daniel reached out one cold finger to touch the baby's arm, pulling it away slowly as he felt the heat emanating from him. He looked up at Nick. "You really love him, don't you, Nicky?"

What did he see in Daniel's eyes? Sadness? Regret for a life long gone? Envy? "Of course I do.Just as I loved you."

"You betrayed me," Daniel accused.

"I tried to save you. But I failed. And I'm sorry. But taking this child will not change what you are."

"It will free me from their omnipresent control--"

"Perhaps. But maybe not. And what will happen to Richard? What will they do once they realize he's nothing more than a human child?!"

Daniel was silent, but his face had clouded over.

"Daniel, Nicolas cared for you," Janette broke in. "We both did. And he never forgave himself for not being able to save you. Can you really do this to him now?"

"Please, Daniel," Natalie implored.

Daniel looked from Nick to Janette, his eyes resting finally on Natalie and the baby. And as his gaze met Nick's once more, Nick believed he could see the little boy who had looked up to him so many years ago. And in those eyes were forgiveness...and compassion.

"I'll tell Stavros I've seen the baby," he said finally. "And that he's completely human." He paused. "You all are."

The tension in the room broke. Nick hugged Natalie and the baby against him, while Janette sighed a breath of relief. Nick looked up at Daniel, at the sad smile that had crossed his lips. "Thank you," he told the boy, his voice filled with emotion.

"No, Nicky. Thank **you.** You may not have been able to save me from this existence--but today, you saved me from losing my humanity altogether." He walked over to Nick, extending his hand. "Good bye. The next time I see you, I promise, it'll be a social visit."

Nick nodded his understanding and gratitude. "Good bye, Daniel. And good luck."

"Natalie...Princess...be well."

"Good bye, Daniel," Janette said, giving him a hug as she had so long ago.

"Thank you," Natalie said simply, her face filled with peace for the first time in months.

And he was gone.

Nick let out a deep breath as a weight lifted from his soul. With one arm, he drew Natalie and the baby towards him, holding them close, kissing her on the forehead. With his other hand he reached for Janette's, squeezing it. She had really come through for him in the end, and his expression told her that he would never forget it.

"It's over," he told them all in a hushed whisper. "It's over."

Natalie shook her head, but was smiling brightly as she looked down at their son. "No. It's just beginning."

The noonday sun was shining brightly, melting the February snow that had covered the street outside the Twenty-seventh Precinct. Natalie tucked the blanket more snugly around Richard, glad that she'd bought him the new snowsuit with its fuzzy hood. A tiny mittened hand reached up to her, and she smiled. "It's okay, sweetie, Daddy's coming soon..."

When she looked up from the carriage, he was coming down the steps, smiling face becoming flushed from the cold, blond hair catching the sunlight. She loved what the sun did to him. She laughed as he grabbed her in a bear-hug, nearly lifting her into the air. "You're in a good mood," she said, kissing him.

"It's a beautiful day," he told her. "You're here...our baby's here..." He peeked into the carriage where Richard

had dozed off once more. "Why shouldn't I be in a good mood?" he said, hugging her once more.

"Well, well, if it isn't the little mother..."

Natalie looked up to see Schanke coming towards them. "Hi, Schank," she said warmly, accepting his kiss on the cheek. "Coming with us to lunch?"

"Nah, I'd like to, but I'm beat. I'm heading home." He peered into the carriage. "Just thought I'd come say hello and take a look at the little guy. Geez, he's getting big." He looked up at Natalie. "You know, I think it's nice you named him after your brother--but does that mean twenty years from now there's gonna be a guy on the force named Rick Knight?"

Nick laughed. "No, I think Richie will be a doctor like his mother."

"Smart kid," Schanke commented. "Look, guys, don't forget, Myra wants to have you over for dinner..."

Natalie promised she would call her, and Schanke took his leave. Nick put his arm around her, wheeling the carriage with her.

"Did you call Father Roquefort about the Christening?" she asked.

"Yes. He said we can do it as early as two weeks from now. All we have to do is pick godparents."

Natalie was thoughtful. "Hm. This is a big decision. Don't laugh, but after all she's done to help us, I really wish we could ask Janette--"

Nick stopped wheeling, looking at her with a blend of amusement and shock.

"Yeah, yeah, I know, the church thing. It was just a thought..."

"It's a nice thought, and I know she's changed a lot, but, Nat, let's not push it."

She laughed. "Okay. Then how about my sister-in-law, Sarah? It would probably mean a lot to her, especially because he's named after Richard."

Nick nodded in agreement. "I think so too. Okay, now we need a godfather."

Natalie grinned. "Well, you only have one really close male friend--"

Nick feigned a look of horror. "Scanke?! No, that means if we die, he's got to raise our kid? He'll have him living on souvlaki and falafel!"

"Come on, now, he's your best friend--"

Nick sighed deeply. "Okay. You win. You're right."

"I'm sure he'll be thrilled," she said, beginning to push the carriage once more. "So, now that that's settled, let's go eat. I'm starved. What time do you have to get back?"

"Oh, I took the rest of the day off," he said nonchalantly.

"Not that I'm complaining, but I thought you were busy with the Peters case..."

"We solved it," he told her triumphantly. "My first case solved as a mortal."

"That's great!" She slipped her arm around his waist. "I told you you could do it."

His nose wrinkled. "It's a little hard when you can't fly, or dominate someone's mind into giving a confession--but I think I'm getting the hang of it."

"Just stay out of the way of flying bullets, okay?" she said gently. "I worry about you now, you know."

He stopped, taking her into his arms. "Nat, the reason I took off, is that Father Roquefort wants to see us."

"About the Christening?" she asked, confused. "Why, is there--"

"No," he told her tenderly. "About our wedding."

Her face flushed with excitement. "Nick..."

"It's long overdue, Natalie. And I won't feel complete until you're my wife."

His kiss could have melted the snow. She melted in his arms. "I love you," she whispered.

"Is that a yes?" he breathed.

"You know it is."

He held her for a long moment, reluctantly releasing her as the wind began to blow. "Come on. Let's get him out of the cold."

They headed arm in arm towards St. John's, and towards the blissful future they'd never even dared dream possible.